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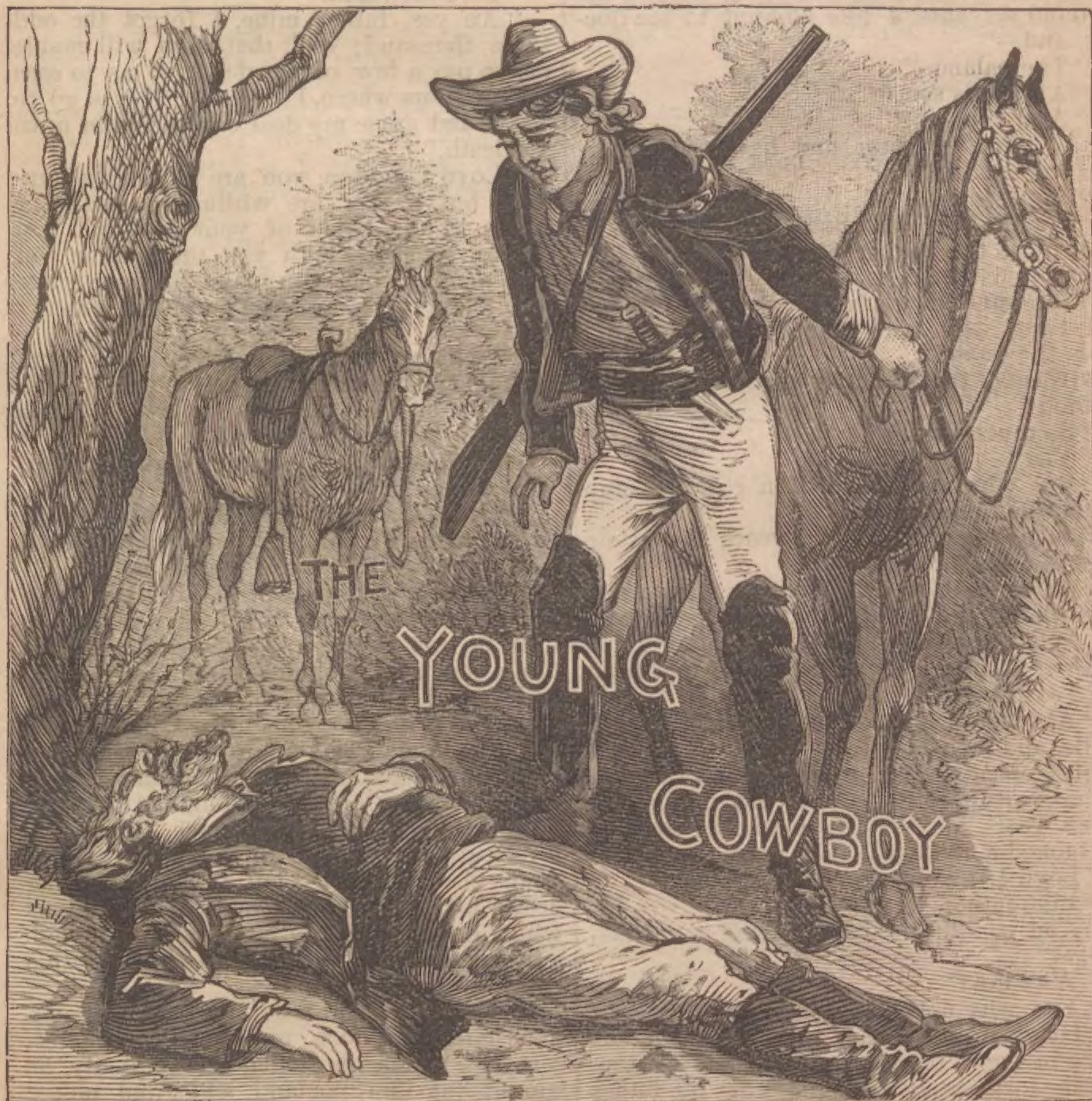
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BEFORE HIM LAY A MAN, APPARENTLY ONE WHO HAD PASSED HALF A CENTURY OF YEARS, FOR HIS
LONG HAIR AND BEARD WERE GRAY.

The Young Cowboy;

OR

The Girl Trailer's Triumph.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "GRIT, THE BRAVO SPORT,"
"BISON BILL," "GOLD PLUME,"
"LITTLE GRIT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE PLOTTERS.

"He is dead!"

"And his will?"

"Leaves a couple of thousand to you, as many more to me, the same sum each to his two old servants, a like amount to the doctor, and—"

"The balance?"

"All to his son."

"And you, sir?"

"Are his executor, and have the will in my possession."

"Well?"

"I wrote the will, but I did not write in the sums; the doctor and the two servants were the witnesses, and I can now write in five thousand for each of us instead of two."

"That will take twenty-five thousand from the estate."

"What of that, for it is worth a clear half-million?"

"So much as that?"

"Yes."

"But what says the will in case this sum cannot be found?"

"If not found in five years the estate goes to charity."

"Curse charity: well, we have five years to work on, and the son shall not be found."

"What mean you, when his father got a letter from him only a few weeks ago from the Texas border?"

"Ah! well, I guess he might die in a short while, and in a couple of years, or more, I might appear as the prodigal son, returning for my fortune left me, for I am only about seven years his senior, and, being cousins, we looked a good deal alike years ago."

"Loyd Langdon, you are a villain."

"Like father, like son."

"And you propose this daring act of rascality?"

"Why not?"

"Yes, why not?"

"He, when his father married again, left home in anger, though but fourteen; his step-mother fortunately dies, and now the father goes, and this runaway boy is left a fortune."

"You are poor and have nothing to give me, and I tell you I can go and get rid of

the boy, wait awhile, and then come back and play Lester Langdon to perfection, for if you, the executor, are satisfied with my identity, what matters it about others?"

"Besides, I am very young looking for my age, and really few know you have a son."

"Now what say you, Judge Dorsey Langdon, to, by my strategy, get a fortune for both of us?"

"But the boy, Lester Langdon, your cousin?"

"Oh! he lives on a ranch in Texas, and that is a dangerous country to live in, you know, for life ends very suddenly there. I have been there, as you know, and these two thousand dollars left to me—"

"Five thousand."

"Ah yes, father mine, I forgot the odd three thousand; well, that sum will enable me to pay a few of my debts, so as to ease my creditors where I live, and also to go to Texas and nurse my dear cousin Lester until his death."

"Loyd Langdon, you are indeed a scoundrel; but if you are willing to dye your hands in the blood of your cousin, I am willing to share with you the fortune you gain thereby; but you must at once leave here, before you are seen and known as my son."

"I will go at once, and you can send to me the small inheritance my Uncle Carter Langdon has left me—yes, I have just time to catch the midnight train."

The speakers, as the reader has surmised, were father and son.

The former had married in haste in his early life and repented at leisure, and Loyd Langdon was the fruit of that union.

With no love for his wife, after her death he had kept the boy at school and college until he was of age, and then purchased for him a ranch in Colorado, and a few cattle, and hoped never to have another call upon his purse from him, for Judge Langdon was not a rich man, having saved nothing, and even squandered his small inheritance.

His brother, Carter Langdon, had carefully invested his small inheritance, married a lovely girl, the mother of the youth against whom the two were plotting, and upon her death had wedded his housekeeper, an act which caused his only child, Lester, though a boy of fourteen, to leave the house with a threat never to return.

While his second wife lived Carter Langdon dared not look up the boy wanderer; but after her death, which was suddenly, he sought for him far and wide, and only a few weeks before his death heard from him, four years after he had left the paternal roof-tree, on the far-away Texas border.

Taken down ill he had longed for his absent boy, but he did not come, and dying, Carter Langdon had willed to him his fortune, and made his dishonorable brother his executor.

CHAPTER II.

THE COWBOY.

By the side of a new-made grave a youth was standing, and the expression of utter sadness upon his face showed that the mound hid from view some one that was dear to him.

The youth was perhaps eighteen, yet seemed somewhat older, for upon his bronzed, handsome face was a self-reliant, resolute look that showed he felt fully capable of taking care of himself.

He was dressed in buckskin leggings, fringed down the outer seam, and stuck in cavalry boots, upon the heels of which were large silver spurs, while a short jacket of velvet, and a gray woolen shirt completed his costume, unless I except the broad-brimmed felt sombrero that sheltered his finely-formed head.

He was tall, supple in build, with broad shoulders, and hands and feet so small that a woman might have been proud of them, as well as of the large, dark, deer-like eyes, with their long lashes.

By a tree at his side leant a rifle, and in his belt were a pair of revolvers resting upon each hip, and a long-bladed knife at his back.

The scene around him was rolling prairie, mountains in the distance, and through the timber island in which he stood was visible an adobe cabin and outbuildings, showing that it was a cattle ranch, if the presence of a few hundred head of cattle grazing near had not done so.

It was a wild, picturesque scene in western Texas, and rendered strangely lonely by the presence of but one human being in view and the new-made grave at his feet.

"Ah, me!" he sighed, "I will never see your kind face again, Don Bartolo, and I will mourn for you as for my own father, for you have been such to me ever since two years ago you found me in Santa Fe a destitute wanderer, and brought me to your ranch.

"I would I knew the secret of your life, for well I know some deep sorrow brought you to this far-away land to live in solitude, and to die, with me alone to soothe your last hours.

"And you have left me your ranch and your cattle, as though you were in reality my father; *my father!* Ah! he has cast me off utterly, for no reply has come to my letter to him.

"Yes, he has cast me off forever, but thanks to you, my noble friend that lies here, I am not a destitute outcast."

For some moments longer the youth stood gazing silently upon the grave, and then, as the shadows began to stretch far across the prairies, turned away with a sigh, and shouldering his rifle, started for the ranch.

It was, as I have said, an adobe cabin, first built of logs, and then stuccoed with clay, and contained two rooms, one of which was used as a kitchen, and the other as a sleeping-room, for there were several cots, covered with bear and buffalo skins in it, and around the walls hung many evidences of the chase.

By the side of the door lay a large dog, and lariatied near were a couple of ponies, while out upon the prairie, feeding among the cattle, were half a score more.

A corral near the cabin showed that the stock had to be driven in at night, for fear of roving bands of Indians making way with them, or worse still, being run off by thieving whites.

"I'll eat no supper to-night, and I guess not sleep any either, Don Bartolo, with your empty cot near me," he muttered, his thoughts reverting once more to the dead form he had only a short while before placed in his grave.

As he spoke the large dog suddenly sprang to his feet, and rousing from his indolence, sniffed the air.

"What is it, Chief?" asked the youth.

As though in answer the dog growled, and held his nose in the direction of the thickest part of the timber island in which the ranch was situated, and which comprised about three acres of woodland.

"Yes, the wind comes from that way, Chief; what is it, Injun or white man?" he said.

Again the dog growled, and the young cowboy, for he had been Don Bartolo's herder, at once walked rapidly through the timber.

Far out upon the prairie, he saw, so soon as he could get a glimpse through the timber, a party of horsemen approaching at a gallop.

"You were right, Chief; but go and get my glass, sir," he said, to the dog, and at once the intelligent animal darted back to the cabin and brought from a peg near the door upon which it hung by a strap, a field-glass.

"Good Chief, now we will see who these visitors are," and after patting the dog affectionately, he turned the glass upon the party.

"Three of them, and—one is a woman.

"Yes, and each one holds a rein of her bridle, and her hands are tied behind her,

"There has been some deviltry there and I will fathom it," and he turned and walked quickly back to the cabin.

CHAPTER III.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

WHEN the Cowboy returned to the ranche his first act was to catch one of the lassoed ponies and lead him to the cabin, where he placed upon him a handsome Mexican saddle and bridle.

The other pony he turned loose upon the prairie, and then he set to work to examine closely his rifle and revolvers, and others that were in the cabin.

Leading the pony into the kitchen and calling Chief to follow, he then returned and sat down on a rustic bench by the door and calmly awaited the coming of those he had seen out upon the prairie.

The sun was sinking lower and lower in the West, and the shadows were growing longer, increasing the look of gloom upon the youth's sad face.

Before long he heard the clatter of hoofs, and saw approaching a single horseman.

It was a white man, and he was well mounted and armed, though his horse showed signs of having been ridden hard, as he came along with lowered head and tired gait.

The face of the man was heavily bearded, and as he drew rein within a few paces of the youth the latter saw that his face was sinister and cruel.

He was however dressed in a cavalry uniform, and his bridle and saddle were of a military pattern.

"Good-evening, young sir; do I address the owner of this ranch?" he asked politely, with a half-military salute.

"You do, sir."

"Rather youthful for a ranchero so far from the settlements."

"I am old enough to take care of myself," was the significant reply.

"You look it; but in me you see only a friend, and I wish to make a purchase of you."

"What do you wish, sir?"

"To buy three of your best horses, or rather exchange ours for yours."

"You are not alone then?"

"No, I have two comrades who have ridden on; our horses are good ones, only tired with a hard ride, and I will give you boot."

"It is getting late, sir, and you better get your comrades and remain here all night, and in the morning we can trade, if your horses are not sufficiently rested to travel."

"No, we are in a hurry to press on, as I bear dispatches," was the reply of the horseman.

"All right, sir; you are from Fort Advance, I suppose?"

"Yes, and going to the River Post."

"You are a long way off the trail then."

"I know the way, young man, so come let me have your horses, and I will bring you mine back."

"No. I will go with you and lead my ponies and drive your animals back," said the Cowboy firmly.

"You seem to doubt me, boy?" said the man angrily.

"I do," and with the words a revolver covered the heart of the horseman.

He turned pale and asked quickly: "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I have the drop on you, and shall fire if you do not do as I order," and the man saw that the youth meant every word he uttered.

"Curse you, boy, you shall rue this," he hissed forth.

"It is to be seen whether I will or not; now, sir, up with your hands while I take your arms."

"A robber, by Heaven!"

"Obey me, or—"

Up went the hands, and stepping up to the man the youth removed the revolvers from his belt and the carbine from his saddle.

"Now, sir, I'll trouble you to dismount."

In angry silence the horseman obeyed.

"Here, Chief!"

At the call of his young master, the huge dog came bounding out of the kitchen.

"I have a prisoner here for you to watch, Chief, while I go and make the acquaintance of his comrades. Hold, out your hands, sir."

The man hesitated, and for an instant seemed about to spring upon the youth: but the revolver covered him, and Chief gave a savage growl that prevented his half-formed plan, and sullenly he held forth his hands.

"Watch him now, Chief," said the youth, as he took a lariat and securely tied the hands of his prisoner, and then bound his feet.

"Now, Chief, keep your eye upon him," and then turning again to the man, he continued:

"If I have done wrong, sir, I will give you half a dozen ponies as a peace-offering; but I believe I am doing right, and at any rate shall soon know, and until I return I warn you not to move from that bench as Chief will spring at your throat."

The man glared wildly at the youth, and seemed to dread the brute even more, but made no reply as he sunk down upon the bench, his face white and lips quivering with fear and suppressed rage combined.

The youth at once mounted the horse of the soldier and rode quietly away in the gathering gloom.

Arriving at the edge of the timber he saw two forms far out upon the prairie, awaiting evidently the return of the messenger.

He rode slowly, because he cared not to be recognized as other than the one expected, and the darkness aiding him he got within a few paces of the two persons seated upon their horses before they saw that it was not the soldier returning.

Instantly one of them attempted to drop his hand upon a weapon, but the youth's revolver already covered him, as he said, sternly:

"Hold! or you are a dead man."

CHAPTER IV.

THE COWBOY PLAYS A LONE HAND.

It was evident that the Cowboy held the advantage, for one of the two he faced in the gathering darkness was a woman, and her hands held not the reins, but were bound behind her, while a lariat led from the neck of her horse to that of the other animal, which precluded the possibility of escape.

The revolver of the youth covered the man, whose hand was arrested as he was about to draw a weapon.

Had the Cowboy been in any doubt before that he was playing a wrong hand, the words that sprung to the captive's lips at his coming dispelled that doubt, for she cried pleadingly:

"Oh, sir, save me from this wretch!"

The voice was soft and sweet, in spite of the distress in its tone, and the Cowboy answered promptly:

"I came here, miss, for that purpose, so have no fear.

"Now, sir," and he turned to the horseman, "you will give me those weapons you wear."

He rode close up to him as he spoke, when the man, with the rapidity of lightning, drew a revolver and fired full in his face.

The flash blinded the youth momentarily, but the ball sped by his temple, and then came his turn, and with the report of his revolver the man fell from his saddle.

Still half-blinded by the flash in his eyes, the youth was unable to rally for an instant, and then beheld two horses, firmly fastened together, flying away over the prairie, alarmed by the shots and the falling of the man from his saddle.

Upon the prairie, writhing in the agonies of death, lay the man he had slain; but of him he did not think, but taking his canteen he dashed water into his eyes, and then sped away in pursuit, crying:

"Come, Red-skin, you must see for both of us, and show your speed to boot."

And the little bay pony did show his speed, for he began to gain upon the flying horses, that in their flight had forgotten their great fatigue.

A run of a mile and Red-skin was in a few lengths of them, and the Cowboy was whirling his lasso to throw it.

The next instant it left his hand, settled down over the head of the riderless horse and the two were captives, while the youth said cheerily:

"Have no fear now, miss, for you are safe."

In her joy at her escape from some fearful fate, the maiden could make no reply and burst into tears.

Quickly the Cowboy unbound the rope from her wrists, and turned the horses back toward the timber, he riding close to the side of the fair captive, who after a few minutes said earnestly, having with an effort controlled her emotion:

"Oh, sir, you do not know how greatly you have served me; but did you kill that man?"

"I fired to do so, miss."

"I feared he had shot you."

"He didn't miss me the hundredth part of an inch, and the powder burnt my eyes a little, or I should have followed you sooner.

"But don't think of it, for I will take you to my ranch to-night, and to-morrow carry you to your friends."

"Oh, thank you, sir, and my father will be most grateful, as I am all he has to love.

"My father is General Earl, the commander of Fort Advance."

"Indeed! I have often heard of him, and am glad to have served his daughter. My name is Lester Langdon, and I am but a poor Cowboy."

"You are a brave one, and—a gentleman, be your calling what it may," was the frank response.

By this time they had reached the ranch, and dismounting, the Cowboy aided the maiden to the ground, and seeing her start, as her eyes fell upon the prisoner, who sat like a statue, with Chief watching him as a cat would a mouse, he said:

"Have no fear, Miss Earl, for I have clipped that tiger's claws."

"Yes, but it's a long lane that has no turning, boy," was the sullen response.

"You'll drop off at the end of a rope before you get to the turn, or I'm mistaken, sir; but come in, miss, and I'll strike a light, and give you some supper.

"You must excuse my humble home, for I am all alone, and only a few hours ago

buried my best friend, who died suddenly."

He led the maiden into the cabin, and lighting a candle, bade her make herself at home, while he glanced furtively at her.

He was struck by the beauty of her face, and the grace of her form, clad in its dark riding-habit, and wondered what could one so beautiful have in common with the wretches from whose power he had taken her.

But why she was at their mercy she had not told him, and he would not ask her, and went outside to make his prisoner more secure.

CHAPTER V.

THE BOY LIEUTENANT.

ALTHOUGH the Cowboy had not been ten minutes in the cabin, when he returned he started with surprise, for his prisoner was not to be seen.

Chief was nowhere visible either, but at his call, came bounding out of the cabin wagging his tail.

"Chief! Chief! you have let that man escape. Oh, you wicked dog."

Chief's tail dropped, for it was evident that he had expected praise and not a scolding.

"I see how it is; when I came back you thought you were relieved from duty, and in some way that rascal freed himself and escaped. And he has taken his own horse and arms, which I foolishly left on the bench. Come, Chief, strike his trail, and I'll see what Red-skin can do."

The dog sniffed around, as if anxious to regain favor in his young master's eyes, and started off at a run, while, throwing himself in the saddle, the youth followed at the topmost speed of his pony.

But the trail, followed by the dog, led in among the ponies and cattle loose on the prairie, and then even Chief's instinct could follow it no further, and reluctantly the Cowboy turned back toward the ranch, muttering:

"I shall have to look sharp, or that villain will be in at the turn of the lane he spoke of. Now to see his comrade."

He bore away to the spot where he had shot the other horseman, and found him lying upon the prairie, his hands clutched in the long grass, and dead.

Raising him in his strong arms, he bore him to a small ravine and tossed him into it, throwing in upon the body brush and earth to cover it.

Then he rode back to the ranch, and having lariatied Red-skin and the maiden's horse out near by, turned the other loose to join the herd, and entered his cabin to find

Lilian Earl somewhat alarmed by his long absence, yet with right good-will preparing supper.

"You see I am taking you at your word, and making myself at home, sir," she said, with a smile, while the color came back into her pale face.

"Thank you, miss, and I know I will never have eaten a supper that tasted half so good," he said, with modest gallantry.

"I see you are like the rest of your sex, given to flattery; but where is your prisoner Burnett?"

"I am sorry to say that my dog, believing my coming back relieved him from duty, allowed him to escape—"

"Escape!" and with the word she again became deadly pale.

"Yes, miss, he mounted his horse and rode away, while I was lighting a candle.

"I followed him for a short distance, but Chief lost his trail, and I came back."

"And the other?"

"I buried him."

"Would to God that it had been Brandt Burnett instead of his hireling that had died, for with that man free I shall be in constant dread of my life."

"Why should he seek to harm you?"

She flushed at his question, seemed annoyed, and then replied frankly:

"He was once, as I believed, an honorable man, and an accepted lover. My father learning that he was a very wicked man at heart, bade me discard him, which I did. That was four years ago, and when we were stationed in the East; but allowing his beard to grow he followed me here, enlisted in the army, without my father or myself suspecting him, and at last made himself known to me and begged me to fly with him. I refused, and afraid of him, I dared not tell who he was, and last evening, while taking a gallop on the prairie, with his hireling whom you killed, and who was my father's orderly, I was seized, bound, and carried to the river, where Brandt Burnett joined us, and he told me that he was taking me to Mexico. Now you know how much I owe you, sir."

"And if I can find this Mr. Brandt Burnett, I will promise you, miss, that I will do you another service."

Lilian Earl glanced into the handsome, daring face, and knew that he would keep his word.

In a short while supper was ready, and the two sat down to the humble but substantial repast of coffee, corn-cakes, antelope-steaks and wild-fowl.

Resigning his best room to his fair guest the Cowboy set to work to prepare for the trip to Fort Advance in the morning, and

when at sunrise Lilian Earl appeared, she found the horses ready saddled, and after a hearty breakfast they mounted and rode away, leaving the cabin locked and tenantless, for Chief trotted along close to Red-skin's heels.

The sun was just setting as they drew near the fort, and wild cheers broke from the soldiers at sight of the maiden, for she was idolized by all, and as for two days and nights parties had been scouring the country in search of her, and without success, it was believed that she and her escort had fallen into the hands of some prowling band of Indians, and the general was then organizing a force to invade the hills and attack the villages of the red-skins.

With a heart too full to speak he clasped his daughter in his arms, and then heard from her lips the strange story of her capture, and her rescue by the young Cowboy.

"A cowboy, you say, Lilian?" said the general, turning to the youth.

"I should say, father, a ranchero, for Mr. Langdon now owns his ranch, the gentleman for whom he herded having died and left him his heir," answered the maiden.

"Well, sir, I owe you more than I can ever repay, but fortunately have it in my power to prove my appreciation, for some weeks ago the President sent me three junior lieutenant's commissions to bestow upon deserving soldiers of my command, and one of those I held over, fortunately, and your name shall fill this blank, Mr. Langdon."

The face of the Cowboy flushed proudly, and in a trembling voice he returned his thanks.

"Don't thank me, sir, for we are the ones to be thankful, not you. Now, to night I fill in your commission, and you can report for duty within the week, and that will give you time to place some one on your ranch to take care of it."

That night Lester Langdon could not sleep for joy and pride.

He had fled from home on account of the ill-treatment of his step-mother; he would return there an honored officer of the army, a rank won by his own exertions.

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGER'S ACCUSATION.

THERE was not an officer at the fort, young or old, but what envied Lieutenant Lester Langdon his good luck in rescuing the general's beautiful daughter from her captors, and, as they gazed on the handsome young soldier, they felt that if he was only a few years older, he would be a most dangerous rival for the maiden's love.

But, as it was, Lilian was several years his

senior, and having cast aside many eligible offers and distinguished officers, it seemed not likely that she would love a mere boy, although she owed so much to him.

Several days only had Lester Langdon been at the fort, and the army tailor had just completed his uniform when there arrived a couple of visitors with letters to General Earl.

These introduced Mr. Loyd Algernon, an English gentleman of wealth, and his younger brother, Leon, who had come to the Texas prairies for a few months' sport in hunting.

With a guide they had come alone from Austin, they said, camping and hunting by the way, and Mr. Loyd Algernon related one strange circumstance that had happened on the trail.

"It was some ten days ago, general," said Loyd Algernon, "that we struck a place on the river where we found good shooting, and I determined to camp for a few days.

"My brother here, Leon, contrary to my wish, strolled off one afternoon, got lost, and seeing a light, for darkness had come on, went to it, and found it shone from the window of a ranch.

"Within, he saw two persons, one lying on the bed and very ill, and the other standing near and gazing upon him.

"He also overheard what they said, and it seems that the sick man had taken the young one into his house, cared for him and treated him well; but it was the old case of warming to life the serpent to sting you, for the youth was ambitious, and had deliberately poisoned the old man to get his property."

"Shameful indeed; but did you hear as much from their words, Mister Algernon?" asked the general, turning to the young brother, who was a slender, handsome youth of seventeen apparently.

"Yes, General Earl; the young man told the other deliberately that he had poisoned him, and stood by and saw him die.

"I wished to interfere, but dared not, so mounted my horse and gave him the rein, and he carried me back to my camp."

"And where was this, you say?"

"Fully seventy-five miles from here, sir."

"I shall send and have the young murderer arrested; your guide will be able to tell me the exact locality."

The guide was sent for and when asked regarding the location of the ranch, said:

"It are on a creek that runs inter the Del Norte, sir: I has passed ther ranch afore several times, and thar is none other in ther neighborhood, and I knows only an old man and boy lived thar, and I thought it were father and son."

"Why did you not, on the charge of Mr.

Algernon here, go and arrest the youth?" sternly said the general.

"We did go thar, sir, ther following day; but ther cabin were locked up and nobody was round, though thar were a new-made grave in the timber."

"The grave of the old man, whom he killed and buried. Well, he shall have a short enjoyment of the ranch his red deed has given him, for I shall send a squadron to arrest him. Do you know the name of the ranchero, guide?"

"I has heerd him called Don Bartolo, sir."

"Don Bartolo!"

The cry came from the lips of Lilian Earl, who had been an attentive listener to the story of the Englishman.

"Don Bartolo! why that was the name of Langdon's benefactor, Lilian," cried General Earl in surprise.

"Yes, father, and his benefactor died only a short while ago. I cannot believe that—Ah, here is the lieutenant now."

"General Earl, I am ready, sir, to bear those dispatches to the Rio Grande," and Lester Langdon entered in full uniform, and booted and spurred for a ride.

"Great God!"

All eyes turned upon the speaker.

The cry burst involuntarily it seemed from the lips of young Leon Algernon, who flushed and said in a tone of apology:

"Pardon me, general, and your pardon I crave, Miss Earl, but I was so startled by the resemblance of the face of this officer to that of—"

He paused, and General Earl said quickly:

"Whom does he resemble, may I ask, sir?"

"It is of course only a startling resemblance; but he is the image of the youth I saw at the side of the dying ranchero."

At his words Lilian Earl turned pale, and the general said in a husky voice:

"Lieutenant Langdon, we have just been listening to a strange story, told by these gentlemen, of a scene witnessed by one of thsm some ten days ago, at the ranch of a certain Don Bartolo."

"Don Bartolo, sir? That was the name of my dead benefactor. May I ask what scene it was, sir?" asked Lester Langdon quickly.

"Upon what night did Don Bartolo die, Lieutenant Langdon?"

"On the afternoon of the 10th, sir; just ten days ago."

"Mr. Algernon, when was it you saw the scene you relate?"

"On the night of the 10th, sir."

"Your ranch is seventy-five miles from here, Lieutenant Langdon, I believe?" continued the general.

"About that, sir."

"Mr. Algernon, describe the place, please."

"An adobe cabin with two rooms, with some outbuildings back of it; it is situated in the edge of a clump of timber, or motte, and near a small stream."

"So my ranch is situated, sir," said young Langdon.

"Lieutenant Langdon, of what illness did your benefactor die?"

"I fear, sir, he poisoned himself by accident, for I cannot believe it was intentional, though circumstances point to such as the case."

"You were with him when he died?"

"I was, sir."

"Any one else?"

"No one, sir."

"He left you his ranch and cattle?"

"He did."

"Where did you meet him first?"

"In Santa Fe, over two years ago; he found me there a poor, friendless boy, and took me home with him," and the young officer's voice trembled.

"You had no ill-will toward Don Bartolo?"

"On the contrary, I loved him as I would my own father, sir."

"Mr. Algernon, how was the young man dressed whom you saw?"

"In buckskin leggings, boots, a jacket and slouch sombrero, and this person is the very one."

"This is a bold charge, sir."

"His face and his voice I will swear to."

"May I ask in what connection, sir?" and Lester Langdon turned upon his accuser with a flashing eye.

"First, Mr. Algernon, tell me the words you heard him utter?" said the general.

"I heard, sir, the dying man say:

"'Ah, Lester—'"

"Lester!"

"Yes, general."

"Proceed, sir."

"'Ah, Lester,' he said, 'I had not believed you would do me this wrong. I have loved you as a son, and now you tell me that you have given me the poison that causes my death, for this is death, as I cannot move.'"

"He then groaned in the deepest agony, and the youth said:

"'My father drove me from his house, and I feared you would some day do the same, so I have murdered you to protect myself, for never shall I be a vagabond, a wanderer again, for this ranch shall be the foundation of my fortune.'"

"Was this all, sir?"

"There was more said, sir, which I do

not recall, and then, in fearful anguish, the man died."

"And you are positive this young man was the one you saw in the cabin?"

"I'll take my oath on it, sir."

"Enough," and General Earl touched a bell and an orderly appeared.

"Send the sergeant of the guard here with a couple of soldiers."

Then turning to Lester Langdon, who stood by as white as a corpse and as motionless, apparently dumb with terror or amazement, he continued;

"I revoke the commission I gave you, sir, as its acceptance has not yet been sent on to Washington, and I send you to the guard-house disgraced, degraded, and wholly shorn of the regard I felt for you when I believed you a young man of honor."

With no reply upon his lips, only one look into General Earl's face, another at Lilian, and a third, long and piercing, at his accuser, who met his gaze unflinchingly, Lester Langdon turned, and placing himself between his guards, walked from the room.

CHAPTER VII.

LILIAN'S STRATEGY.

THE arrest of Lester Langdon, upon a charge so base, cast a deep gloom over the inmates of the fort, for the youth had been liked by one and all, from the general to the humblest soldier.

All wished to believe him innocent, yet how could they reconcile themselves to such a belief against the damning testimony of Algernon against him.

He had accidentally been the witness of a scene he dared not intrude upon, and had arrived at the fort to find a young officer there, the very one who had committed the crime he told of.

Circumstantial evidence pointed to the truth of his charges, and upon his testimony Lester Langdon was tried, found guilty of murder, and sentenced to be shot within the week, for the general wished the matter well off his hands, and wished to forget the one he had had to thank for saving his loved daughter from a fearful fate, and had found so unworthy of his regard of him.

In his lonely prison of logs sat the youth, pale, stern and silent, for not a word had he said other than that he was not guilty of the charge.

He seemed heart-broken at the end that must be his, yet uttered no remonstrance, and day and night paced his prison, his wrists in iron manacles, awaiting the inevitable with calm resignation.

The sentinel before his door heard the prisoner pacing to and fro and seemed to pity

the youth that he had to die, for once or twice he sighed and murmured:

"A brave bhoy, be jabers, ef he did be afther killing the ould man."

"Dennis!"

The sentinel started, turned to the right-about, for he had heard no step, and beheld before him a female form.

"Begorra, but ye came upon me loike an angel, miss," he said, saluting, for he thought he recognized the fair form and face before him, in spite of the heavy cloak and hat.

"May nothing worse than an angel ever catch you unawares, Dennis; but you are on duty until midnight, I believe?" said the muffled visitor.

"In faith I am, miss, for I come on an hour ago at eight."

"I believe your term of enlistment has expired, Dennis?"

"I don't get yer meaning, miss."

"Your time of enlistment as a soldier expired three days ago?"

"Faith it did, miss."

"And you are not going to re-enlist?"

"No, miss, for I wish to see the ould lady and the little ones, whom I left five years ago to come soldiering?"

"How is it you are on duty now?"

"The garrison was short of men, miss, as the major took so many on the raid yesterday, and I told 'em I would sarve the few days I would be here until the train went East, with which we discharged sogers goes."

"Ah! then if you left now you would not be a deserter?"

"No, miss, for I'm out of the army."

"So I thought; have you been paid off?"

"Yes, miss, and I have a nice sum to carry to the ould woman at home."

"Dennis, would you not like to increase that sum?"

"W'u'd a fish loike to swim, miss?"

"Well, I will tell you how to do it."

"Its Dinnis O'Rourke thet's all ears, my lady."

"You know me?"

"Yes, miss."

"Well, you know that I care not to see one die who served me, no matter of what he is accused, and I wish to save him."

"The boy?"

"Yes."

"Poor fellow, but it can't be done, miss."

"It can."

"Divil the loikes o' me knows how then."

"I will tell you."

"I'm listening to yer swate voice, miss, which is as pleasant as ther winds on the lakes o' ould Killarney."

"Well, Dennis, in my stable you know I have several good horses?"

"Yes, miss, some dandies."

"Well, get your saddle and bridle, go there and take your pick, and then get the animal that belongs to Lieutenant Langdon and saddle and bridle him."

"But if they see me, miss?"

"They will not, for I have gotten the stablemen out of the way at supper with my maid."

"And what am I to do then, miss?"

"You are to take the horses to the grove yonder and wait for me; but mind you, Dennis, get your own luggage, for you will have to go."

"Have to go, miss?"

"Yes, here is just one year's pay for you, according to your late rank as an artillery sergeant, and I give it to you for a purpose."

"Howly Moses!" said the surprised Dennis O'Rourke.

"If you were an enlisted man I would not ask you to desert; but as it is you can go, and I will take the blame upon myself."

"You and the prisoner can go together and ride hard to prevent capture."

"Here is a pass that will let you out of the forest gate of the fort, and the sentinel will not know who you are."

"They will miss you when they come to relieve guard at midnight, but you will have been gone three hours then, and the scouts cannot follow your trail until daylight, so that you can make good your escape, as Lester Langdon knows prairie-craft well."

"Now go, Dennis."

"Must it be said that Dennis O'Rourke, of old Ireland, deserted his post?"

"It must; here is your money."

"You know best, miss, and God bless you. You are after being the general's daughter, and I obeys orders. Good-by to you, miss, and the Vargin preserve you from harm, and Dennis O'Rourke, too."

Lilian Earl held out her hand, and the Irishman grasped it and went on his mission, while she calmly took his musket, advanced to the door of the log guard-house, and turning the key, which was on the outside, stepped within.

It was but dimly lighted, but at one quick glance Lester Langdon recognized his visitor, and bowed low, yet did not speak.

"Mr. Langdon, to-morrow you are sentenced to die; but I will not see you shot when, in my heart, I cannot believe you guilty, and I have come to set you free."

"It will only get you into trouble, for your coming as you do proves to me that you do so clandestinely," he said, sadly.

"Yes, I do; but I have arranged all for your escape, and it will not get me into trouble, for my father will readily forgive my act, and be glad that I saved him the

pain of executing one who so nobly served me."

"But the sentinel will suffer?"

"No, for as good luck has it, his term of service is out, and he goes with you, and I will protect him."

"Come, your horses and the sentinel await you, and by dawn you can defy pursuit. Here are your rifle and revolvers, and this military overcoat will disguise you, and see, I free you of these irons," and she unlocked them as she spoke, with a key she had brought with her.

The youth could not speak for the emotion that welled up into his throat from his overflowing heart.

But at last he said, sadly:

"No, Miss Earl, let me remain and meet my fate, for I have nothing to live for now, as my every hope is crushed."

"You have something to live for."

"Name it, please."

"You are young and the world is before you; and more, you can yet prove your innocence perhaps, in spite of the seeming guilt that condemned you."

"Hal now you give me new life, and I go free to prove to you that I am not the guilty one that man and boy made me," he said eagerly.

"Then go, and lose no time; you will find Dennis O'Rourke awaiting you in the timber with horses. Good-by, Lester, and may Heaven bless you."

Again his emotion choked back his utterance, but taking the hand of Lilian he pressed a kiss upon it, seized the coat and his arms and walked out of the guard-house.

Watching him she saw him enter the timber, and following slowly, she beheld a moment after two horsemen ride up to the gate of the fort, and the sentinel halt them.

But after glancing at their pass, by the light in the sentry-box, he permitted them to pass, and with a sigh of relief, she glided to her room and throwing herself upon her bed burst into tears.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CONFESSION.

THE escape of Lester Langdon, and the disappearance of the sentinel, Dennis O'Rourke, was discovered only at the relieving of the guard at midnight, for the log prison where the condemned youth had been confined was apart from the regular fort guard-house, and kept only for special service.

In her room Lilian Earl heard the alarm, and also the order of her father to at once have all prepared for a hot pursuit at dawn, for it would be worse than useless to attempt

to pursue until daylight showed what course had been taken.

When her father was again alone she entered his room and approached him in silence.

"What, Lilian, the alarm has aroused you, too, has it?" he said.

"I had not retired, father, for I was waiting until the discovery of Lester Langdon's escape was made, to come and tell you that I set him free."

She spoke in distinct, firm tones, and in almost horror her father sprung to his feet and gazed upon her.

"You, my child, did this treacherous act in my own command?" he cried sternly.

"Father, you know from what Lester Langdon saved me, and—"

"True, but that gave him no claim to become a murderer, and—"

"Father, in spite of the charge against him I cannot believe him guilty, and this prompted me the more to set him free. Your sentinel, Dennis O'Rourke, was not a soldier, only voluntarily doing duty and therefore was not a deserter."

"You reason like a woman, for he deserted his post of duty."

"And you, father, reason like a soldier, for he was not an enlisted man, and therefore not a deserter, and a sense of honor alone could have kept him there; but the prisoner has gone and—"

"I shall send a force after him with the dawn."

"It will do not an atom of good, for they are both well mounted, and Lester Langdon is a thorough prairieman, as you know. They are safe and I am here to surrender myself for punishment."

"Go to your room, Lilian, and know that I am very angry with you, and the garrison will laugh at me for being bullied by a child."

"They will not, sir, for there is not one here who wished to see that boy shot. Good-night, father."

General Earl made no reply, and Lilian, with a sigh left the room.

Then the general muttered:

"Egad, she's right, for I only wanted the shadow of an excuse to save the boy for what he did for me, though I cannot believe him otherwise than guilty."

With the earliest dawn, however, a gallant dragoon captain and twelve men rode out of the fort in pursuit of the fugitives.

But as Captain Rollo Willoughby was about to mount his horse to start, a soldier slipped into his hand a note, and said:

"To be read, sir, after you leave the fort."

It was just light enough for him to see the

handwriting, and his face flushed as he sprung into his saddle and rode away, followed by his troopers.

Once away from the fort and he tore open the misive.

It was but a few lines, and read:

"You have professed to regard me with the highest esteem, and I ask you to prove it by not bringing back to the fort that poor boy, whom I set free, from appreciation of the service he rendered me.
LILIAN."

"By the beauty of Venus, this places me between two fires, love and duty; which shall I obey? I will think it over and then decide, for it is catching before hanging, anyhow."

CHAPTER IX.

THE LOST TRAIL.

WHEN Lester Langdon left the fort he seemed as anxious to get O'Rourke beyond harm's way as himself, and, knowing the country thoroughly, he headed for the nearest point where the ex-sergeant would be able to catch a train going east.

The two rode rapidly until dawn, and then camped for breakfast and a short rest, and then pressed on until noon, when a train was discovered following the trail to Shreveport.

"Here, sergeant, you can join yonder train going east, and will soon reach the settlements and thus go on home, and give this to the children as a souvenir of one you nobly served," and Lester Langdon placed a roll of bills in the hand of his comrade.

"Howly Mither of Moses! does yez intint to make a millonaire out of me altogether?" cried the delighted Dennis.

"I hope you may be; now good-by, sergeant, and remember I'll not forget you."

"Divil a bit will I forgit you, sir, for it's a gentleman you are from top to toe, ef they does say yez p'izened the ould man; but good-by, sir, good-by, and may the Vargin niver forgit you, or Dinnis O'Rourke."

They grasped hands in farewell, and when the Cowboy saw the soldier join the train, he turned slowly and went on a course to the right oblique.

Until sunset he followed this course, and then ascended a range of hills, and glanced over the prairie.

Far away in the distance he saw a party of horsemen, and after watching them awhile, he said:

"Yes, they are troopers, and they are following my trail; but they must camp in a few moments, and doubtless in that clump of timber, as it is getting too dark for them to see. In the morning I will watch them from here follow the trail to where I parted with the sergeant, and then they will be at a

loss. If they go on after the train then I will ride after them and draw them in chase of me, for O'Rourke shall not be caught, and I am not afraid of their horses catchin' Red-skin. If they follow my trail, then I can easily cover up my tracks in these hills, and they will have to return to the fort, while I—yes, I will go to the ranch. At any rate, Red-skin, we will have a good night's rest."

As he had predicted the party of Captain Willoughby had to camp on the trail at dark, and made themselves as comfortable as possible in a small timber motte for the night.

But with the first glimmer of dawn they were ready to resume their way, and Moccasin Mike, the old scout and trailer, seemingly followed on after the faint trace left by the two horses of the fugitives.

Upon coming to the spot where the Cowboy and sergeant had parted, the troopers came to a halt.

"They hes parted comp'ny heur, cap'n, thet are a Gospil fact," said Moccasin Mike.

"But why?"

"Waal, I guess ther sargint hes gone on eastward, while ther lad hes tuk ther back track."

"I cannot understand why, Mike."

"Waal, cap'n, ther sargint were anxious ter leave Texas an' the way he tuk are ther right trail ter do it; while ther Cowboy likes Texas an' it don't seem as if he were goin' ter leave it."

"But, Moccasin Mike, how do you know which one went east, and which one the other way?"

"Signs, cap'n."

"What signs?"

"Ther sergeant rid a American horse, didn't he?"

"Yes, one of Miss Earl's 'twas said."

"Ther Cowboy rid a mustang, didn't he?"

"Yes, his own horse."

"Waal, the American horse goes thet way, and heur goes ther mustang."

"Then if I follow the mustang we'll be right?"

"Yas, cap'n, if we hain't wrong."

"How mean you, Mike?" asked Captain Willoughby, convinced that Moccasin Mike had something more to say.

"Perhaps they mought hev changed hosses."

"Ah!"

"Thet Cowboy is a cunnin' one, cap'n."

"Well, I dare not divide my force, Mike, to follow both."

"Thet are so, cap'n, fer this are Injun kentry."

"Then we follow the mustang tracks."

"As you say, cap'n, for you is boss, and heur goes."

And off on the mustang's trail they start-

ed, and early in the afternoon reached the hills, and then even Moccasin Mike's skillful prairie craft, and keen eyes, got at fault, for, upon the banks of a small stream, all traces ended.

In vain they searched until darkness shut them in; nowhere could the lost trail be found, for most thoroughly had the Cowboy covered up his tracks.

Going into camp for the night, the next morning Captain Willoughby gave orders to mount and start back to the fort, and that night they camped in a motte through the edge of which ran a small stream.

In the upper end of the timber was visible an adobe cabin.

It was the home of Lester Langdon, the Cowboy.

CHAPTER X.

LOVE AND DUTY.

WHEN the troopers had encamped upon the stream, and were preparing supper, Captain Willoughby strolled up to the ranch, which had a deserted look, and that even the well-posted Moccasin Mike did not know to be the home of the very one upon whose fugitive trail they had started.

"A bold ranchero to live thus far from any settlement," muttered the captain, as he approached the adobe cabin, and rapped upon the door.

No response came.

"Off herding, I guess; ah, the door is unlocked, and I will see if the place is wholly deserted."

He pushed open the door as he spoke, and entered.

Observing that the place seemed to be occupied, for there was every evidence to that effect in the rude furniture, and general interior, he was about to retrace his steps, and leave the premises unmolested, when suddenly, out of an adjoining room appeared a human form.

"Captain Willoughby!"

"Lester Langdon!"

The names broke simultaneously from the lips of each, and the hand of each dropped on a revolver.

But the Cowboy was the quickest, and his weapon covered the heart of the officer ere he could draw his revolver from his hilt.

"Hold! you are at my mercy, Captain Willoughby, so do not force me to kill you; but I will not be taken alive."

"Put up your weapon, Langdon, for I have no desire to take you," was the cool reply of Rollo Willoughby.

"Do you mean it?" eagerly asked the youth.

"I do."

"And yet for three days and nights you have been on my trail?"

"True, my duty forced me to follow you, though I frankly confess that I was glad you escaped."

"I thank you, sir, for your kind wish, but am surprised you wish to have a criminal escape punishment."

There was a tone of bitterness in the youth's words that caused the captain to hastily say:

"To be frank, Langdon, I do not believe you guilty, and have so stated, though I admit it is fearfully damning, the proof against you."

"From my heart I thank you for those words; but whatever your belief, your duty will force you to take me, if in your power."

"If my men saw you, yes; but they are encamped upon the creek, and I walked up here alone; is this your home?"

"It is, sir."

"Strange that I should have come here, for losing your trail, I was on my way back to the fort."

"Yes, I threw you off my trail, for I saw you when you camped the first night out, and seeing that you did not follow the sergeant, but me, I thwarted you."

"And most cleverly, for Moccasin Mike is a good plainsman."

The Cowboy smiled, and then replied:

"See, sir, I lower my weapon, and you have me on equal terms."

"And I say I will not take you, and shall go back to my camp for fear some of the men may come here and discover you, and in that case nothing can save you."

"I would fight your whole force, sir, before I go back to be shot, for I am determined not to be taken until I prove that I am innocent of the charge against me."

"Do so, and I will be the first to extend a helping hand."

"Thank you, Captain Willoughby. Now let us part, for I would not have your men believe you derelict in your duty."

"There is a motive in my actions, independent of my belief in your innocence, Langdon, that sways me stronger than duty just now."

The Cowboy looked at the officer in surprise, and seemingly reading his thoughts, asked quickly:

"Tell me, Captain Willoughby, did Miss Earl suffer for her noble act toward me?"

The officer flushed and answered:

"Oh, no; and all the right minded will uphold her in it. Good-by, Langdon, and may you one day prove the charges against you utterly false; but you have a hard duty to perform in doing so, as young Alger-

non certainly had no motive for his accusation."

The Cowboy made no reply, and Captain Willoughby, with a wave of his hand in farewell, left the cabin, and Lester Langdon was alone in his desolate home, from which he now felt he must be an exile, for he knew that day and night those who heard of his escape would be upon his trail.

CHAPTER XI.

THE TABLES TURNED.

IN spite of the near presence of the troopers whom he knew to be upon his trail, Lester Langdon was determined not to be driven from his home until he was prepared to go.

His mustangs and cattle he had placed in the care of a neighboring ranchero, dwelling some thirty miles away, and it had been his intention to return to his cabin and pack up what things of Don Bartolo's and of his own, that were valuable, and remove them to the fort; but ere he could do this, the arrival of the two Englishmen caused his arrest and trial, and now he had come there to *cache* them, so that they would remain in safety until he wanted them, which would be when he cleared himself of the charge against him of murder.

Determined not to be caught in the cabin, should any one come, he placed Red-skin, saddled and lariatied out to feed in a small ravine a hundred yards away, while he laid down upon his blanket within sight of the ranch.

He was suddenly awakened by a heavy tread and beheld a horseman pass near him.

It was evident that the stranger was anxious to be most cautious, for he halted his horse every few steps and paused for awhile.

It was dark, and the Cowboy was concealed beneath the shadow of the trees, and he lay motionless, gazing upon the horseman, who soon dismounted, and hitching his horse, moved cautiously toward the cabin.

Step by step, hesitating at each one, he approached, until he passed around the corner.

Instantly the Cowboy was upon his feet, and within a moment's time stood at the corner of the cabin.

The stranger stood at the door, and had evidently knocked, for the Cowboy heard him say:

"Wake up, pard, for I'm an old friend."

The voice was disguised, and yet the youth recognized the speaker, and as noiselessly as a panther he glided forward and placed his revolver against the man's head, while he said sternly:

"Brandt Burnett, I want you."

The muzzle pressed against the back of the man's head, and the hand of the youth

clutched the revolver he held, and with which he intended to shoot the Cowboy when he opened the door.

He dared not move for he knew it would be his instant death, and he merely uttered a savage curse.

"Release this weapon, sir."

He quietly let it go, and the Cowboy placed it in his own belt.

Then he took from him with his right hand while his left still held the revolver against his head, his other arms.

"Put your hands behind you, sir."

The man obeyed.

Then the Cowboy took from his own pocket the very handcuffs which he had worn, and which he had brought with him, and clasped them on the prisoner, who muttered:

"You go well fixed, boy."

"Yes, and I have a rope convenient, but I guess I'll make you the guest of General Earl."

"General Earl! what the devil do you know of him?" cried the man in alarm.

"Oh! I know you, Brandt Burnett, in spite of your disguise, and I owe you one for escaping from me the other night; but General Earl wants you more than I do, and he shall have you."

"I am not the one you think I am," was the sullen reply.

"Oh, yes you are; but come into my parlor, my friend," and the Cowboy led the prisoner into the cabin, and striking a light, securely bound him.

Then he went over to a chest in the corner, and taking out some clothing, a false wig and beard, put them on and left the cabin.

He went directly to the horse ridden there by Brandt Burnett, mounted, and making a circle out of the timber approached the camp of the soldiers, and was halted by the sentinel.

"Is this a military camp?" he asked, innocently.

"Yes; who are you?"

"I am a scout from the upper parts, and I would like to see your commanding officer," was the reply.

Captain Willoughby had heard the sentinel's challenge and what followed, and rising from his blanket came forward.

"Well, my man, you wish to see me?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," and in a low tone he continued:

"I am Langdon, the Cowboy, and wish you to come with me to my cabin, for I have a prisoner for you."

The captain started, for the disguise of the youth was so thorough he had failed to recognize him.

But he said aloud:

"Well, my man, if you can give me any important news I will accompany you."

"Better not go alone, sir," whispered the sergeant, coming forward.

"Oh, I have no fear."

"I don't recognize him, cap'n, as any scout I know," said Moccasin Mike in a low tone.

"Never mind, I will trust him," and the captain walked away with the disguised Cowboy, who had dismounted and was leading Burnett's horse behind him.

CHAPTER XII.

A SUBSTITUTE.

MAKING a circuit of the timber motte, the Cowboy led the captain directly to his cabin, neither speaking a word until they drew near it, when the latter asked:

"Well, Langdon, what means this masquerade?"

"Had I gone to your camp without disguise all would have known me. A man, the one who kidnapped Miss Earl, came to my cabin awhile since to kill me; I was too quick for him, and I would be glad to have you take him to Miss Earl from me."

"With pleasure, and his life will not be worth a cent when the general lays his hand upon him; but they will know that I have seen you."

"No, I will send a sealed letter, and in my disguise you know me only as Yankee Sam, a scout from the upper parts whom I resemble in my disguise."

"And the prisoner?"

"Is in my cabin."

"I hope you bound him firmly."

"I did, remembering his escape once before."

They entered the cabin together and by the light of the candle they saw Brandt Burnett, bound as the Cowboy had left him.

Taking paper and an envelope the youth wrote with a pencil as follows:

"MISS EARL:—

"In return for your kindness I send you the name you have so much cause to dread and who escaped from me the night I rescued you from his power.

"He visited my cabin to night, whither I had come to pick up some articles of value, as being an outcast, I have no home now, and I made him prisoner just as he was trying to inveigle me out to kill me.

"Knowing that Captain Willoughby and his troopers, who were on my trail, are encamped near, I disguised myself, sought the captain, and into his hands give the prisoner with this letter to you.

"Brandt Burnett goes to you with the same handcuffs on that you took from my wrists, and I hope he will be in some part a substitute for your thankful friend, known to the troopers as 'Yankee Sam,' but whom you know now as the unfortunate Cowboy and outcast,
LESTER LANGDON."

"You can read the letter to-morrow, and then seal it, so you will know what I have

written," said the youth, in a low tone, and then aloud he continued:

"Captain Willoughby, I give into your hands this prisoner, whom you will doubtless recognize, and whom General Earl is anxious to have in his power."

"Well, sir, I recognize you as the deserter, who with an ally, kidnapped Miss Earl, and I am glad to get my clutches upon you," sternly said the officer; but the prisoner made no audible reply, only uttered something like a smothered oath at the predicament his desire of revenge against the Cowboy had gotten him into.

Turning to address the youth the captain found that he had left the cabin, and going to the door could not find him.

Placing a small silver bugle to his lips he gave a call, and instantly it was answered from the camp, while half the troopers came at a run, and the others remained to saddle up the horses and follow, as all believed their captain in danger.

Moccasin Mike was the first to arrive, and cried out, as he caught sight of the officer:

"He played yer false, then, cap'n?"

"No, Mike, he gave me a valuable prisoner whom he had captured; one the general will be as glad to see as though we had brought back the Cowboy."

"Come, sergeant, break camp, and we'll march, for it is after midnight, and we can make a long halt at noon."

Two of the men then took the prisoner in charge; but as his horse could nowhere be found, they mounted him behind a trooper, and the party set off for the fort.

It was just at sunset when they arrived, and as they rode into the plaza, all expected the prisoner was the unfortunate Cowboy, until they caught sight of him, and then a yell of joy went up at the capture of the man, for his disguise having been removed, the sinister, cruel face of Brandt Burnett was revealed in all its wickedness.

Straight to the general went Captain Willoughby, and Lilian being sent for, the letter was delivered to her in the presence of her father, and was read aloud.

"By Heaven! had I the power, I would pardon the boy for the capture of that wretch, who shall be quickly court-martialed, and as a deserter and kidnapper will suffer death."

"The boy was near you then, Willoughby, while you were looking for him?" said the general.

"Yes, sir, so it seems."

"And you did not penetrate his disguise?"

"It was at night, sir, and he called himself Yankee Sam, a scout I had heard of,"

was the evasive reply of the young officer, and seeing his face color at the prevarication, Lilian felt sure that he did know the youth, and for her sake had let him go.

"Well, I am glad the boy got away, and I hope, as Lilian believes, that he will prove his innocence; yet how, God only knows. By the way, captain, we lose our English guests in a few days."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes, they have taken a fancy to go into Mexico on a hunt, and are only waiting for a competent guide, as there is no one here just now that I can recommend, though some one must drop along soon."

"I wish they had never come, for then Lester Lang—" But Lilian did not finish her sentence, and swept from the room with a smile of thanks to Rollo Willoughby that fully repaid him for the decision he had made between love and duty.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DYING HERMIT.

AFTER having packed his traps and cached them, which he did as soon as the troopers left the cabin, the Cowboy mounted Redskin, and leading the horse of Brandt Burnett, loaded with such things as he needed, set forth just at dawn to seek other quarters, where he could live in safety, until he had formed some plan to discover why the English hunters had laid the charge of murder against him.

Toward noon he rode into the hills, and turned into a canyon, where he expected to find good water and grass for his horses.

Suddenly he drew rein, for he beheld, lying beneath a tree, the form of a man.

At first he believed him to be dead; but a deep groan told him to the contrary, and confident that the man was ill, or wounded, he rode forward and hastily dismounted.

Before him lay a man, apparently one who had passed half a century of years, for his long hair and beard were gray.

His form was slender, yet denoted strength, and there was that in his dress that at once showed he was a plainsman.

He opened his eyes as the Cowboy bent over him, and said in an absent kind of way:

"Who are you?"

"A Cowboy; can I serve you in any way?" was the response, in a soft, kindly tone.

"Yes; you can stay here to see me die."

"It is not as bad as that, I hope."

"It is as bad; I shot myself by accident, a few hours ago, and it will be a fitting death for me, I suppose."

"But the wound may not be mortal, so let me see it."

"It is mortal, for I know; it is in my right side, and I am bleeding internally."

One glance at the wound was sufficient to tell the boy that the man must die, so he said nothing, and the other, who watched his face, said quickly:

"Well, did I not say right?"

"I fear so."

"I will not live long?"

"I think not."

"Who are you?"

"A Cowboy."

"Ah! so you told me."

"Can I do aught for you?"

"You are not one of the rough kind; Texas is not your home?" said the dying man, gazing into the frank, handsome face of the youth.

"No; my home is in the East, but I live in Texas now."

"You speak sadly, as though misfortune drove you here as well as me. And misfortune of the bitterest kind made me a fugitive. See, boy, I am not the old man I seem, but wear this beard and wig to hide my face from my fellow-man, as I am a poor, hunted wretch."

As he spoke, with a quick movement he removed from his head and face the wig and beard which not for a moment the youth had believed false.

A stern face of a man of thirty-five was revealed, clean-shaven and refined.

"Who are you?" asked the surprised youth.

"As I am dying I do not mind telling you, for I wish you to do me a service. For ten years I have been known as the Hermit Pathfinder."

"I have heard of you."

"Doubtless, for I have lived to myself in the mountains, only occasionally acting as guide to a train or military force, and they called me the Hermit, for I cared not for company, and Pathfinder, as I know every foot of this southwest border. But my real name is Mabrey Monkton, and I was born poor, and sought to remove those between myself and fortune, and was discovered, sentenced to be hanged for murder, and escaping through my accomplice, Brandt Burnett—"

"Brandt Burnett—"

"What! do you know him?"

"I have met him."

"Where?"

"At a fort in Texas."

"What fort?"

"Advance."

"What was he doing there?"

"He enlisted under an assumed name, sought to kidnap the daughter of General Earl, was captured, and is now at the fort, where I expect he will be shot."

"Thank God! boy, he it was who tempted me to kill, and when I was caught and tried, I did not betray him, and he, hearing I intended making a confession, aided my escape, gave me money, and I fled here. I have written him, and never would he reply, and it was to now betray him that I asked you to serve me in, for I have papers that will hang him, and I have grown revengeful leading this outcast life. Oh, God! how I suffer; but it will soon be over."

"I will do all I can for you," said the Cowboy kindly.

"I see that in your face; now listen to me."

"I will, sir."

"My camp is ten miles from here in the hills. Back yonder is my horse; mount him, after I die, and give him the rein and he will carry you there, for I cannot direct you how to find it. In the cave you will find, under the ashes of the hearth, a layer of stones, beneath which are some papers. Look them over, if you wish, and carry them to General Earl, telling him how you got possession of them, and they will hang that wretch Brandt Burnett. And more, let him know that I strike him from my grave; I, Mabrey Monkton, whom he led from the paths of honor and made what I this day am. You will do this for me, my boy?"

"Yes, I pledge myself to do so," was the earnest reply of the Cowboy, and then a silence came between the two, and it was evident that the end was near at hand.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GUIDE.

SEVERAL evenings after the return of Captain Willoughby and the prisoner Burnett, there arrived in the garrison an old scout, with dispatches from the upper country forts.

He also brought a bundle of papers addressed to Miss Lilian Earl, and said they had been given him by a youth for her especial hands.

Lilian took the package with a look of surprise upon her beautiful face, and sat down at her father's table to look over the papers which she saw it contained, while the general was reading his dispatches and letters.

To her surprise she recognized the writing of Lester Langdon, and read the following:

"MISS EARL:—A man dying in the mountains the other day, intrusted to my care the inclosed papers, which you will see are letters from Brandt Burnett, written some years ago to one, Mabrey Monkton, and criminating himself in certain deeds of a murderous nature done by Monkton, to get hold of certain property.

"Monkton was found out, tried and sentenced to be hanged, but escaped through the agency of Bur-

nett, and fled to Texas, and he it was that told me his story and died here in the mountains.

"I send you the papers to aid in convicting Brandt Burnett, should more proof of his villainy be needed than what is already known against him.

"LESTER LANGDON,

"The Cowboy."

Without a word the maiden placed the letters in the hands of her father, who read them in amazement, and cried:

"Why, Lilian, this very property the villains were working for belongs to my great aunt, Dorothy Western and Mabrey Monkton is her nephew and my cousin, and according to her will, if two persons died, he was to be her heir. Those are the two he killed, and he was put up to it by Brandt Burnett, whose father was Aunt Dorothy's lawyer, and knowing that you, if she died without making another will, would become her heiress, he had been determined to marry you. Well, I shall place these letters in the hands of the gentlemen of the court-martial, and this one here will criminate him, for it says:

"Curse you, Mabrey, for a coward, for your nerveless hand did not force your blade to the seat of life, and I had to finish your work."

"And you owe the discovery of these papers to Langdon, the Cowboy, sir," said Lilian, quietly, and she handed over the youth's letter.

"Well, it does seem that he is destined to serve us, does it not, although he is a fugitive from my order of execution against him."

"Please call the old scout back again, father, and ask him about the youth," said Lilian.

The general at once did as requested, and in came the scout and dispatch-bearer, and seeing that he was an old man, Lilian told him to be seated.

"Thanks, miss, but I doesn't be tired; my legs has plenty o' grit in 'em yet," was the reply.

"Well, my man, where did you get those papers you gave my daughter?"

"Was they papers?"

"Yes."

"Ther young feller kind o' said as how that it was a package."

"All right, where did you meet the one who gave them to you?"

"Up in the mountains, near Comanche Pass."

"It was a young man?"

"Yas, gineral, a youth like, and he told me ter give 'em ter yer darter."

"Was the youth alone?"

"'Ceptin his horse, he were."

"He sent no other message?"

"Nary."

"Well, my man, I see by my letter from Colonel Doan, that you would like a place as guide, scout or hunter for this fort?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is your name?"

"I calls myself Old Hickory."

"You know this country well, I suppose?"

"Perfect, gineral, and I hain't so old as I look, and you needn't fear I can't git round, fer I'm awful peert o' leg."

"Well, I wrote Colonel Doan that I wanted several more scouts and guides, and I will take you, and— Come in, Mr. Algernon, it is nothing private, as I am only engaging a guide," and the general turned to his English guest, who just then entered the room.

"I hope one you can spare me to take me into Mexico, General Earl," said Loyd Algernon.

"Certainly, if you wish it, as I cannot tell just when my other scouts will return. What say you, Old Hickory, would you like to guide this gentleman into Mexico?"

"I are willin', gineral, to go anywhere."

"Then you are my man, and we'll start to-morrow, and—"

"He has just arrived from a long ride, Mr. Algernon, and a rest of—"

"Never mind my restin', gineral, I thank ye, fer Old Hickory never tires. I are ready, sir, whenever you sings out the word."

"Then at dawn to-morrow we start, my brother and myself."

"I hain't carin' ef it's ther whole fam'ly, pard; I'll be ready."

And thus it was arranged, and early the next morning the two Englishmen and their guide left the fort.

But Loyd Algernon seemed ill at ease, for he had offered himself to Lilian Earl, and had been refused.

CHAPTER XV.

A THREAT THAT WAS KEPT.

It was the first night in camp, and the three horsemen had found a most delightful spot in which to rest for the night.

The grass was rich and abundant, and the three saddle-horses and pack-horse were cropping it with delight, while a limpid stream flowed near, and a ruddy fire sent its glare out into the surrounding forest.

After a substantial supper, which Old Hickory cooked and served with a style that showed he was versed in border life, the two brothers sat down before the fire for a chat, while the guide went off on a scout for an hour, as he said:

"To see thet thar hain't no Indians 'round."

He had hardly disappeared before Leon

Algernon turned to his brother and said abruptly:

"Well, what do you propose doing?"

"Finding that boy."

"Lester?"

"Of course."

"It will be a hard task."

"I don't care; he must be found and put an end to, or all will be lost."

"And then?"

"I shall go back after awhile and carry out my original plan."

"You are playing a deep game."

"The result is worth it."

"You are playing a double game."

"How mean you?"

"You are treacherous."

"To whom?"

"To me."

The man started and gazed into the other's face.

"I repeat it," said the youth, firmly.

"You are a fool to say such a thing."

"You think so?"

"Yes."

"But I have proofs."

"Proofs of what?"

"Your treachery."

"To whom?"

"To me."

"What proof have you?"

"The best in the world, for I saw and heard you last night ask Lilian Earl to become your wife."

The man made no reply, but turned deadly pale, and glared at the other with a strange look in his eyes.

"Aha! you see I know you as you are, and for that act of treachery I shall thwart your plans."

"Thwart me?"

"Yes."

"She refused me."

"True, but I do not think of her."

"Of whom then?"

"Of the boy; you shall not get his fortune."

"I shall."

"I say no, for I shall expose all."

"You?"

"Yes."

"I dare you to do so."

"I will, for I am revengeful."

"My God! but you shall not; swear not to divulge the truth, or I fire," and he leveled a revolver at the youth.

"Never! you cannot intimidate me," was the fearless reply.

"By Heaven I will keep my word, for no life shall stand between me and my plot now."

He ran his eye along the barrel as he spoke, and the one at whom it was aimed

gazed with a defiant smile into his face, evidently feeling that the man would not pull the trigger.

But he knew not the cruel, black heart within, for the finger did touch the trigger, and with the ring of the revolver the youth fell backward, a wild cry upon his lips, from which broke the words:

"Oh, God! you *have* killed me."

"I meant to," was the stern reply.

"And I will kill you, if you move a muscle."

The speaker was Old Hickory, and he held a revolver at the head of the one he addressed, who uttered a cry of terror, yet dared not move, for fear of the fatal shot he felt would be sent into his brain.

"Hal hal hal Loyd Algernon Langdon, I will be avenged after all."

The one who uttered the words was the youth, as he lay upon the ground in the very agonies of death, and yet with a gleam of malicious joy in his eyes at the trap in which the one who had so cruelly shot him down found himself.

CHAPTER XVI.

A MYSTERY SOLVED.

EVEN Old Hickory seemed impressed by the words of the youth, wrung from his lips in the midst of his torture, and said quickly:

"I'll tie this fellow, and then be with you, to see if I can help you."

"No, I am beyond all help; but do not let him escape, and I will tell you who and what he is," the youth replied, earnestly.

For Old Hickory to disarm, and then securely bind the man with a lariat, was but a minute's work, and then he knelt by the side of the dying youth, who groaned in anguish.

"I fear your wound is fatal," he said, well knowing that it was.

"Ah, I know that; but before I die I wish to revenge myself on that wicked man there, and—"

"Leone, for God's sake spare me!" cried the man.

"No, I will not; you plead in vain. Here, guide, listen to every word I say, and promise you will look up one whose name I give you, and tell him all I tell to you."

"I will."

"Leone!"

"Silence, for I will tell all!" he cried, and again turning to Old Hickory, he continued:

"You promise me, guide?"

"I swear it, as I also swear that this man shall die for killing you," was the firm response.

"Do you hear that, sir?"

But the man she addressed sat with bowed head, pallid face and trembling form.

"Now, guide, the one I wish you to seek is Lester Langdon."

"The Cowboy?"

"Don't call him a Cowboy, for he was regularly commissioned as an officer, and will be again as soon as the truth is known."

"The crime of which he is accused he never committed, and I only made the charge I did against him for the love I bore that man. Yes, the love, for I am not what I appear."

"I am a woman."

The guide fairly sprung to his feet with surprise at her words, while the prisoner gave a deep groan of rage and terror combined.

"You a woman?" said Old Hickory, no longer using the border dialect that had seemed so natural to him.

"Yes, I am a woman, and the wife of that man."

"His wife?"

"Yes, Leone Langdon."

"Leone Langdon!" echoed the guide after her.

"Yes; eleven years ago I became his wife, and we were secretly married, for I was then a mere girl of fourteen and he in his nineteenth year only, and he dared not tell his father, who he told me was very rich and would disinherit him."

"Wedded to a man in secret, and one whom I soon found out to be a villain at heart, though he hid his sins from the world, I still loved him, though I should have hated him."

"But then I had a dear little child that helped to keep me from hating its father, I suppose, for I know no other reason."

"At last I too became wicked, for when he told me of a plot he had formed to defraud his cousin, Lester Langdon, of a fortune left him by his father—but are you ill?" and she turned to the guide, who seemed to be suddenly seized with some severe pain, as he pressed his hand heavily upon his heart.

"Oh no; it was but a sudden pain; please continue your story," he said, in a low tone.

"I said that Loyd Langdon and his father entered into a plot between them, to get rid of Lester Langdon, whom they knew to be out in Texas here, and to take his fortune."

"But you go to the fort, guide, tell General Earl that I died by the hands of my pretended brother, and that he asked his daughter to become his wife, when already he had a wife living. Tell him that I entered into the plot to get Lester Langdon out of the way, that we might possess his fortune, as

when he was dead, that man, Loyd Langdon, was to go back to his father, the executor of Carter Langdon's estate, and profess to be the runaway son."

"Will you do this for me, guide?"

"I will."

"Now, Loyd Algernon Langdon, who is the victor, you or I?" and she turned her eyes upon the bound prisoner.

But not a word did he utter in response, for he seemed wholly crushed by the sudden blow that had come upon him.

"And, guide," continued Leone Langdon, the unfortunate wife, "the reason we left the fort hurriedly was to find Lester Langdon after his escape, and this very night that man was going to offer you a large sum to track the boy down."

"But I heard his words to Lilian Earl, and it told me how vile he really was, and it turned me against him, and because I threatened to tell all, he shot me."

"I heard all, and saw all," said Old Hickory in a low tone.

"Now, guide," and her voice grew each moment weaker, "I wish you to tell Lester Langdon one thing from me."

"I will."

"Tell him that, as, through me, he gets his fortune, I beg of him to seek my child and care for her through life, never letting her know how vile were her parents, and that her mother died by the hand of her father."

"I promise you faithfully to do all you wish," was Old Hickory's fervent response.

"Then I die content; here is a letter I wrote at the fort to my child."

"Give it to Lester Langdon, for her address is upon it."

"Ah! I have not the strength to take it from my pocket."

Old Hickory quickly drew the letter from her pocket, placed it in his hunting-shirt, and clasped the hand of the dying woman.

And thus, with no other word to the man who had wrecked her life, and that cowered, silent and trembling near, she breathed her last, the guide holding her hand until the pulse of life was stilled by the icy touch of death.

CHAPTER XVII.

A WRITTEN PLEDGE.

"SHE is dead!"

"Oh, God!"

"Your hand took her life."

"Oh, God have mercy!"

"You will swing for it."

"Good heavens, man, have you no mercy?" and the bound captive looked appealingly at Old Hickory.

"None for you."

"I have done you no wrong, old man."

"You killed her."

"What is that to you?"

"Much."

"Bah! don't be a fool, but listen to reason, for I can make you rich."

"What are riches?"

"Don't preach, but listen; the woman spoke the truth; I have a fortune in my grasp if you will only aid me to get it."

"Me!"

"Yes, you can help me."

"What can I do?"

"You can do much, everything, and I will share it with you, and the estate is worth half a million."

"A large fortune."

"Half of it shall be yours."

"What would an old prairie man do with such a fortune?"

"You are getting old, and it would enable you to live in luxury."

"What am I to do for it?"

"To release me, say that my wife, or rather brother as we will still call her, shot herself by accident, and then aid me to hunt down Lester Langdon."

"All that is easy to do."

"Of course; now release me, and—"

"I'll get yer ter sign a leetle dockiment fu'st," said the guide, dropping back into his border dialect style of talking.

"Sign what?"

"A paper."

"What about?"

"Sayin' as how after ther death o' this heur Lester Langdon, ef I aids yer ter do ther biz, yer'll pony up one-half o' ther fortin' ter me."

"Won't my word do?"

"No."

"I hate to sign a paper."

"I won't take your word."

"It will compromise me if found."

"I'll take car' o' it, pard; but after I hes done ther biz, you might forgit me ef I didn't hev ther paper. When I hes ther fortin' you kin hev back ther paper, same as a note yer hed paid."

"Well, I'll write it with my pencil."

"No, yer hes pen an' ink in yer baggage, fer I seen 'em."

"Unbind me and I will get them, then."

"No, I'll get 'em, ef yer'll tell me whar they is."

The prisoner, with a muttered oath, told the guide where to find the writing materials, and they were brought to him.

"Now I release yer right arm fer yer ter do ther writin' with."

He unbound the arm, and said:

"Now write as I tell yer."

"Well?"

"I hereby pledge to Old Hickory, guide, half of a fortune I am to come in possession of through the death of Lester Langdon."

"I have it written."

"Sign your name."

"It is done; now take the paper and untie these accursed bonds."

"I'll take ther paper, pard, and not untie them ropes, fer yer goes ter Fort Advance with me sure as shootin'."

The reply utterly overwhelmed Loyd Langdon, and a cry of rage, terror and despair commingled broke from his lips, and his head drooped forward upon his breast, as though every hope in life had suddenly been taken from him.

Without noticing the emotion of his prisoner, Old Hickory placed the paper in the same receptacle of his hunting-shirt, where he had put the letter given him by poor Leone, and throwing some wood on the fire, walked down to the bank of the little stream, and with a small shovel, which had been among Loyd Langdon's things on the pack-horse, began to dig a grave.

It took him quite a while to complete his task, and several times he went up and threw wood on the fire to give him light.

But at last his work was done, and he walked up to where the body lay, and taking it up, wrapped it in the blanket she had used as a *serape*.

The prisoner, silent, despairing, stern, gazed upon him, for into his brain and heart had come at last remorse for his crimes.

Down to the grave Old Hickory bore the body and tenderly laid it out of sight, and then began throwing in the earth.

At last all was done, and coming back to the fire, he unbound the prisoner from the tree, and said:

"You had better get all the rest you can, for at dawn we start on our ride back to the fort."

"Curse you, there is no rest for me."

"So I believe, pard, after what yer has did; but thar are fer me," and rolling himself in his blanket, he threw himself down to sleep, for he well knew that in the locality he then was he need expect no visit from friend or foe, red-skin or pale face.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FACE TO FACE.

As the evening shadows were falling upon the prairie, General Earl was greatly surprised to see ride into the fort plaza two persons whom he believed far away.

It was the evening of the day following the one on which Leone Langdon had lost her life, and of the party that had started out, two came back, and Old Hickory was riding by the side of Loyd Langdon, who

was firmly tied in his saddle, and behind came two led horses, one the pack animal, and the other Leone's spirited mare."

"In the name of Jupiter, scout, what means this?" said the general, in surprise.

"I'll tell yer, gineral, when you hev give me a audience," said the scout, rapidly unfastening the lariat from about the prisoner, who sat with bowed head in his saddle, and a face that was utterly colorless.

"Young Algernon not with you, and you. Mr. Algernon, in bonds; there is some strange mystery in all this," said the general.

But neither the prisoner nor the scout spoke, and aiding him to alight from the saddle, Old Hickory led his captive on after the amazed general.

"Now, sir, what means this?" and the general turned sternly to the guide, who asked quickly:

"C'u'dn't Miss Earl and another witness be brought in, sir, to hear what I hev ter say?"

"Yes," and in an impatient manner the general called to an orderly to summon Captain Willoughby, while he went to his daughter's room and called her.

In surprise both of them entered, and glanced from the guide to the pretended Englishman in utter amazement.

"Now, scout, speak out, for my daughter and Captain Willoughby are here as witnesses," sternly said the general, and he glanced at Loyd Langdon, who stood like a statue, white, trembling and with bowed head.

"Waal, gineral, fu'st I'll say I went with yer English friends on the'r trip, an' ther fu'st night we struck camp things didn't turn out right."

"What was wrong, sir?"

"I'm tellin' yer, sir; you see I kinder suspected 'em, and arter we hed pitched camp, I said as how I'd go on a scout round fer an hour or two, and I left 'em sittin' by ther fire."

"But I didn't go fer, but crept back ag'in an' got behind a tree, and then I heerd thet they was not English—"

"Not *English*, sir?"

"Nor Irish nuther, gineral."

"Then what are they, in Heaven's name?"

"They was a man and a woman."

All started at this sudden and unexpected exposure, and the general said quickly:

"Impossible; they brought me letters, as two brothers, from friends of mine, and—"

"Them letters were part o' their leetle game, gineral, for I tells yer one were a man, this one here, and t'other were a woman, and she are lying back at our camp in her grave."

"Dead! Leon Algernon dead?" cried Lillian.

"Not Leon, miss, but *Leone* Langdon, for she were this man's wife."

"His wife?" gasped the maiden.

"It are true; they was married eleven year ago, when they was but children, fer I had it from her lips. But he was going to get rid of her and marry you, miss, if he could. She heerd him tell you he loved you, and ask you to be his wife, the night before we left here, an' thet are what raised ther Satan in her, and it ended by her threatenin' to expose all, an' he shot her."

"He shot her?" said the general.

"Kilt her, fer she died half an hour arter."

"Good God! but what was all this done for?"

"What does it all mean?" cried the puzzled general.

"Yes, what can it all mean?" said Lillian.

"Gold were at the bottom of it, gineral, fer this man know'd that a young cousin o' his hed been left rich by his father's death, and the father of this heur gent plotted with him to get the fortune, for the heir had left home some years before, and were known to be in Texas. This man got his young wife inter ther plot, an' they come heur an' made a charge ag'in' this boy heir, whom they found was a young officer, and—"

"Lester Langdon, as I live!" cried Captain Willoughby.

"Yas, cap'n, it were him; but when he escaped they had to dig out soon and catch him, or all would be lost. But this gent's talkin' love to Miss Earl raised the jealousy o' his wife, and she jist swore to tell the whole biz, and it cost her her life. I seen it all, but didn't think he'd shoot her; but when he did, I jist made him prisoner, and we are heur."

"And right glad am I that you have brought him here, scout; you shall be rewarded for it."

"I have a big reward offered me by him, gineral, if I'd let him go free and help him kill the boy. I got him to write it, and then I brought him here. Here's the dockimint, gineral," and the guide handed forth the written pledge given him by Loyd Langdon.

"Your name, then, is Loyd Langdon?" said the general, when he had read over the paper.

"Yes," was the husky reply.

"And you sought to remove your cousin and thereby gain his inheritance?"

"There is no need of denying it now."

"And shot your wife?"

"The guide has told you."

"Enough, your own words condemn you to death."

"Captain Willoughby!"

"Yes, general."

"You will have a file of soldiers carry this man to the prison where Burnett is confined."

"Yes, sir."

"Put him in irons."

"Hand and foot, sir?"

"Yes, and Burnett, too, for there must be no escaping in this case."

"I will see to it."

"And the court martial shall assemble within a few days, and the precious pair shall be hanged."

"Have you other orders, sir?"

"Yes; in the morning send out any scout you can find about the fort to hunt for that deeply wronged boy, and have notices written and sent to the posts and settlements, assuring him to come in, as he has been proven innocent."

"Yes, sir, and I am delighted that it is so," and Captain Willoughby turned to depart, when Old Hickory recalled him.

"One moment, cap'n."

"Well, scout?"

"I guess yer needn't send out no scouts lookin' fer the Cowboy."

"Why?"

"Do you know where he is?"

The general and captain asked the questions in a breath.

"I does."

"Then you go and find him, my man, and I'll pay you most liberally," said the general.

The scout simply walked toward the general a couple of paces, and said, quietly:

"Lester Langdon, the Cowboy, is before you, General Earl."

With his words he removed his white beard and hair, and instantly was the handsome, resolute face of the young Cowboy revealed.

A cry of amazement broke from the lips of all present, while Rollo Willoughby turned to the prisoner, and said:

"Now, sir, you are face to face with the one you sought to murder and rob."

A groan was the only answer of the wretched man.

CHAPTER XIX.

CAUGHT IN THE TOILS.

THE few days following the most startling *denouement*, regarding the villainy of the supposed English brothers, and the murdering of his wife by Loyd Langdon, the greatest excitement prevailed in the fort.

And the metamorphosis of Old Hickory into Lester Langdon, the Cowboy, was another cause for wild gossip, and the youth became the lion of the fort.

His commission, which the general had not destroyed, or even reported, on account of there being but a mail once or twice a month, was restored to him in full honor, and fellowship was extended to him by all.

The ladies, the wives and daughters of the officers at the fort, intended getting up a dance in honor of the brave young lieutenant; but this he begged they would not do, as he had just learned of the death of his father, who had been very dear to him.

Obtaining leave of absence for an indefinite period, as soon as he had given his testimony against both Loyd Langdon and Brandt Burnett, Lester left the fort to go East and see about his inheritance.

Arriving at his old home, which had been his birthplace, he found that his uncle was living there in grand style, and to gain an idea how evil he was at heart, he introduced himself as a secret messenger from his son, Loyd Langdon.

"Ah, yes, you are doubly welcome; but where is the boy?"

"In Texas, sir, at Fort Advance."

"Indeed! and he sends me news by you, doubtless?" said the wily lawyer.

"Yes, sir, he found his cousin, and having an opportunity to accuse him, with every appearance of guilt, of committing murder, he did so, and the result was, as the boy was a soldier he was sentenced to be at once shot."

"By Heaven! but Loyd worked well."

"He did indeed, sir."

"Sent he no letter by you?"

"Letters are compromising, you know, Judge Langdon; we were together there, and as he asked me to be his ally, of course he got me to come on and report to you."

"Well, I am glad to see you, my young friend; but do you know I think you look devilish like my son Loyd."

"I should do so, for I am his cousin," was the cool reply.

"You his cousin; you don't mean that there is another son of Carter Langdon, of whom I have not heard?"

"Oh, no. He had but one son."

"Lester."

"Yes."

"The one who was shot, you say?"

"The one who was sentenced to death, but escaped—"

"Escaped!"

"Yes, Judge Langdon."

"Then Loyd is—"

"In prison, and I, Lester Langdon, hold you in my power!"

In spite of his civilian's suit of clothes, Lester Langdon drew a revolver from beneath his coat with startling quickness, and, as it covered the dishonorable lawyer, he

gave a startled cry and sunk back in his chair, muttering:

"You are Lester, for I see it now."

"Yes, you miserable old rogue, I am Lester Langdon, come to claim my own."

"I am executor, and—"

"You shall be so no longer; give it up voluntarily, or the law shall—"

"No, no, I will resign my charge into whosever hands you command me, only spare me exposure."

"Then to-morrow be ready to do as I wish, for I shall call with two of my father's friends as I am not of age yet."

"I will, I will."

"And you had better then go from here to hide your dishonored head, for ere long the story of your son's villainy, and yours will be known—"

"Spare me! spare me! Yes, I will go far away and hide from those who have known me."

"Oh! that I had not listened to the temptations of that vile boy," and in utter despair the man buried his face in his hands and groaned aloud, while Lester Langdon turned, and without another word left the room and the mansion.

But, true to his promise, the next day he called with a lawyer, and two old friends of his late father, and the transfer of executorship was made from Dorsey Langdon into their hands, and an hour after the dishonorable uncle and his nephew parted, the former to seek a new home where the brand of guilt upon him was not read by every eye that met his own.

CHAPTER XX.

PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT.

It had been the intention of Lester Langdon to immediately keep his pledge to the dying mother, Leone, and care for the daughter by sending her to boarding-school; but knowing that the affair regarding himself would gain publicity, and that it might be taken to the ears of the young girl, if in a large city, he determined to let her remain where her mother had left her, as it was in a frontier settlement in Colorado, where she would never be likely to hear of the affair.

At any rate he determined to visit her, and tell her of the death of her mother and father, for he expected that Loyd Langdon had already been executed, and let her believe they had died of fever while traveling south.

But just as he was about to start for Colorado, there came news of an Indian uprising upon the Texas border, and attacks having even been made upon Fort Advance by the red-skins, and post haste he started to re-join his command.

Taking advantage, upon his arrival in Texas, of a Government wagon train going toward the Rio Grande, he went with it, and arriving at the nearest point that it went to Fort Advance, he determined to start alone, although urged not to do so by all of his comrades.

But he knew the country well, was mounted upon a superb horse he had bought, with another he used as a pack animal, and felt confident he could get through all right, especially as he had purchased a repeating rifle, and was otherwise thoroughly armed and equipped.

Remaining at the last camp, while the train went on, he gave his horses the advantage of a day's rest, and at night started to ride the thirty miles to the fort, preferring to ride in the darkness, as the Indians were known to be roving about in all directions.

The animal he rode was noted for speed and bottom, but unused to prairie life, as was also the other one, which trotted along behind as faithful as a dog; but should it come to a race, he felt that he could depend upon them to distance all pursuing Indian ponies.

He had ridden some ten miles when he saw the glimmer of a light ahead.

This caused him to halt and peer cautiously in advance.

Again he saw it in the darkness, and his quick eye detected the cause.

"A man lighting a pipe, or cigar," he muttered.

"An Indian would not do that; but I must be cautious," he added.

Knowing, if he took one horse from the other, the one left would neigh for his mate, he dismounted and lariatd them both out to feed, while he advanced cautiously on foot.

A walk of a couple of hundred yards showed him through the intense darkness ahead a clump of timber, and the sound of voices distinctly reached his ears.

Throwing himself upon the grass he crept nearer and nearer until he could hear every word distinctly.

And what he heard caused him to tremble with excitement.

A white man was speaking in English, and after every few sentences his words would be repeated by an interpreter in the Comanche tongue.

And what the white man said was to urge the red-skins to join him in an attack upon Fort Advance before dawn.

He told them that they could easily take the place, as he, having been a soldier there, knew a log in the stockade that had been sawed off even with the earth, and was on secret hinges, it having been done by the soldiers to slip out through at night, and go

over to the sutler's at the post, a few hundred yards away, and get whisky.

He also explained that trees grew inside the fort near this secret gate, and five hundred warriors could creep through and hide, until ready to make the attack, and that as there were but half that number of soldiers there, and they would be taken by surprise, a victory would be easy and the spoils great.

Without waiting to hear more Lester Langdon crept away from the spot, reached his horses, mounted, and making a wide circuit around the motte, in which he knew was a large force of Indians encamped, he at last came in sight of the fort lights.

Suddenly up from the grass ahead of him sprang a horse and rider, and two shots were fired in rapid succession.

But the shot of the youth proved that he had not lost his unerring aim, during his stay in civilization, for the one he fired at fell dead, while his horse galloped off over the prairie.

"An Indian sentinel, and I'll carry his scalp to the general," said the young officer, as he dismounted and took the hideous trophy, after which he again rode on rapidly until halted by the sentinel.

"A friend," he answered.

Being ordered to dismount, and advance and give the countersign, he replied:

"I am Lieutenant Langdon, and I return with important news for General Earl," he answered.

"Bravo, Langdon! is that you? and who is with you?" cried a cheery voice, which the youth recognized.

"I am alone, Captain Willoughby," and ridding forward his hand was warmly grasped by that officer, who was just going his rounds of inspection.

Instantly he told what he had overheard, and while he went to notify the general, the captain went in search of the secret exit through the stockade, and by showing that he knew of its existence, got a soldier to offer to show it to him.

Having found the place he at once sought General Earl, who had just decided to take Lester Langdon's advice to allow the redskins to enter the fort secretly, and then open on them, having the heavy guns turned on the spot to greet them with.

"It is a good plan, general," said the captain, and at once preparations were made to surprise those who sought to surprise.

CHAPTER XXI.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

THE fort was dark and seemed in deep repose to the half-thousand Comanche warriors, who having left their ponies a mile back upon the prairie, were creeping like huge

snakes through the tall grass toward the stockade walls.

In their advance was a man wearing a chief's head-dress of feathers, yet with the face of a white man, and unerringly to the secret opening through the wall he led his dusky warriors.

With his knife he caused the heavy log to swing open upon its secret hinges, and through the space thus made, he passed alone, while his followers lay prostrate in the grass.

All was quiet within, and the night was very dark, as the clouds shut out the starlight.

One by one as he called to them in a whisper, the warriors entered and ranged themselves along the stockade walls in the deep shadow of the trees.

At last he passed the word for the different chiefs to take their bands to the attack of the various points and quarters, for he had described to them the interior of the fort, and just what to do.

But with the first movement from the stockade came a ringing cry:

"Fire!"

With the word there flashed forth a brilliant line of fire, and the red glare of heavy guns, and the explosion seemed to shake the very earth.

Wild cries, shrieks, groans and defiant war-whoops were heard, mingling with the stern orders of chiefs.

But the fearful volley had laid many a dusky warrior low, they had been surprised instead of surprising, and as the soldiers were charging forward with cheers, they dashed through the narrow passage in the stockade, scaled the walls, and fled in mad, wild confusion.

In dismay, their white leader stood like one dazed.

He knew to go with his red-skin allies would cause his instant death at their hands as a traitor, while to be taken by the soldiers, his end would be equally certain.

In terror, he determined to seek a hiding-place until the Indians had fled, and then to seek safety in flight alone.

With this intention he made a dart for a cabin that he knew stood in the timber near the stockade, and was deserted.

But suddenly a form confronted him, and a shot flashed in his face.

"By the star of Texas! but I got you, traitor renegade," cried a voice, as the man fell.

"Ha! you are that accursed Cowboy," hissed the man as he bent over him.

"Yes, I am the Cowboy, and I shall soon know who you are; here! this way with a lantern,"

"I will tell you: I am Brandt—Burnett—*and—Lilian—Earl—is—my—wife.*"

He spoke in gasps, and with the last word his life had ended.

In surprise Lester Langdon heard who he was, for he had believed him executed long before; but the words of the renegade startled him still more, and he turned away just as General Earl came up, and recognizing the youth by the torches his escort carried, cried out:

"Well, Lieutenant Langdon, thanks to you, we have gained a great victory, and Willoughby is mounting his men to pursue; will you go?"

"I am wounded slightly, general, so will not; but here is the white leader, whom I just killed, and it is Burnett, whom I believed dead."

"Dead! thank God, at last; but are you sure he is not playing 'possum, as some weeks ago he and that delectable cousin of yours managed to escape in some mysterious way, and—"

"Loyd Langdon is not dead then?" cried the youth.

"Not a bit of it, for the two got away."

"Well, Brandt Burnett is," was Lester Langdon's cool reply, as he bent over the body and placed his hand upon his heart.

Then he walked away, as an officer came up and spoke to the general.

As he reached headquarters he was met by Lilian, who had seen him before to welcome him back.

"Lieutenant, a soldier has just told me that you killed the white renegade leader of the Indians?"

"Yes, Miss Earl."

"Is it true?"

"It is."

"Did you know him?"

"I did, Miss Earl."

"Ha! your manner tells me it was—"

"Brandt Burnett."

"Thank God! thank God! at last! at last!"

The words fairly rung from her lips, and then she cried:

"Did he die without a word? Said he nothing?"

"Yes; he said to me that I had killed Brandt Burnett, and that *you* were his wife."

"Who heard him say this, Lester Langdon?"

"I, only."

"Thank God! and I beg you to keep my secret, for, that man I did marry years ago, when I believed him honorable. He fascinated me, for I never loved him, and urged me into a secret marriage with him, and foolishly I consented, and it has been a thorn

in my side ever since. No one else knows the fearful secret, Lieutenant Langdon, and I beg of you to keep it."

"I will, Miss Earl, and I thank Heaven you are at last free from that wretch, and—"

"Good heavens! you are ill! help! here, guard!"

The maiden cried loudly for help, for, the wound received by the youth, although slight, had been steadily bleeding, until at last he fainted from loss of blood, and fell at the feet of Lilian Earl.

CHAPTER XXII.

CRIMSON KATE.

Six years have passed away since the night of the secret attack upon Fort Advance, headed by Brandt Burnett, who, driven from among his own people by his crimes, was forced to fly to the red-skins for succor.

In those six years changes had come, for General Earl had retired from the army, and had gone to his old home in Virginia to end his days, leaving his daughter behind him as Mrs. Rollo Willoughby, for, after confessing to that gallant officer her secret marriage, he had readily forgiven her and made her his wife.

With the rank of a lieutenant-colonel, Rollo Willoughby was in command of Fort Advance, which had been enlarged and improved, having become a most important center in border warfare.

Among his most distinguished young officers was one who was the idol of his men and the lion in army society, for he was known to be the bravest of the brave, a perfect prairieman as well as soldier, and his courtly manners, superb form and handsome face made him the cynosure of many a bright eye that sought to gain his regard.

This person was Captain Lester Langdon, commander of the scouts and guides of the fort, and whose courage and dash had raised him step by step in rank, until at twenty-three he had won his captaincy.

Known to possess a large fortune, and besides having several cattle ranches he had invested in, he yet clung to frontier life with a tenacity that was remarkable for one who had the means to live a life of indolent ease in the large cities.

But not only did he cling to his frontier life, but was constantly upon the trail of the red-skins, and the desperadoes that infested the country from the Colorado to the Rio Grande.

One day with Moccasin Mike and three other scouts, all noted for their pluck and daring, Captain Langdon had started out on a little trail, and three days after Moccasin Mike had tottered into the fort on foot,

wounded in several places, and with a sad story to tell.

As he related it to Colonel Willoughby, after his wounds were dressed by the surgeon, it was:

"Yer see, col'nell, we hed been findin' hot traces o' both Comanche and Apache, and ther cap'n held on, thinkin' he'd get better knowledge o' what they were arter. Waal, our hosses were pretty well played out, and the second night we went into camp in the hills, whar we thought we c'u'd lie low fer a few hours and rest. I were standin' guard, and t'others were sleepin' ther sleep o' ther just, when all of a suddint a hand were laid on my arm. God love yer, col'nell but I thought it were ther devil fu'st, an' then I see it were an angel. Ther moon were as bright as daytime afore sun-up, an' I were standin' under ther shadder o' a tree, an' right by my side she stood, for she were a woman, or rather a gal."

"A girl in that wild region, Mike?"

"Yes, col'nell, a gal."

"An' Indian girl, you mean," said Lillian Willoughby, who was present.

"I does not mean an Injun gal, miss, but a white-an'-whiter clean through."

"A white girl, scout? You surprise me," said the colonel.

"I surprise myself when I seen her; but thar she were, and oh Lordy! but she were han'some. In fact, pards—I beg yer pardon Col'nell an' Mrs. Col'nell—I doesn't mean *pard*s; in face the gal were too durned pretty, fer her fact were lovely an' her form were lovelier, and—"

"How was she dressed, Mike?" asked Lillian.

"In crimson, Mrs. Col'nell."

"Crimson?"

"Ef red is crimson, she were drust in crimson, fer she had a red jacket, crimson leggin's, an' wore a black sombrero with a red plume. She were armed, too, fer a small rifle, glit'rin' with silver truck, hung at her back, an' a revolver were p'inted at me; showin' she hed me thar. I didn't move, 'cause I dar'n't, an' jist looked inter her beautiful eyes, an' said, pleasant-like:

"'Good-evenin', miss."

"But she didn't good evenin' worth a cent, but said back, an' her voice were as sweet as whisky runnin' out ther neck o' a jug:

"'Thar are hundreds of Injuns 'round you heur, an' in ther mornin' yer will be discovered, so wake up your pards an' git.'

"She didn't say *git*, adzactly, but wurruds to them effect, an' I understood 'em, an' I replies:

"'Thanks, miss, we'll do it, an' I'm obleeged to ye.

"'But who might you be?"

"She smiled painful sweet, an' said back: "'Ef yer wishes ter remember me, call me Kate.'

"She then jist waved her hand and moved away, while she again said:

"'Go, and at once, or it will be too late.'

"I can tell yer, col'nell, I was all tuk aback, bu'st up and upsot; but I woke up ther cap'n, and tole him jist what I hed seen.

"'Mike, you was asleep an' dreamin'," said he.

"But I tole him he oughter know I wasn't one o' ther sleepin' kind on duty, an' he laughed, just as ther' came ther hoot o' a owl from not far away. Now, col'nell, a owl hain't got no dulcet voioe, but I recognized in them dismal notes the tone o' thet crimson gal, and says I:

"'Cap'n, let us dust.'

"'All right, Mike, I will heed the warnin'."

"Well, col'nell, we levanted out o' that, an' we hedn't gone fur afore we see ther crimson gal—"

"Call her Crimson Kate, Mike," suggested Mrs. Willoughby.

"Sart'in, miss, an' it are a pretty name as ever I hearn; waal, we see that Crimson Kate were right, fer Indians were as thick as bees.

"But we went slow, scouted round, an' tried to sarcumvent 'em, as they all seemed drawin' toward a sart'in p'int, which were about whar we had been when ther gal—I begs pardon, miss, ther Crimson Kate, come an' warned me.

"Waal, we soon see thet thar were but one thing to be did, an' ther cap'n don't fool no time away when he's got ter do a thing, an' he says:

"'Boys, we are hemmed in, and must cut through; draw yer sixes in both hands an' foller me, fer thar is work ter be did, an' we must begin it.'

"We did as he told us, an' seein', fer we was at ther foot of ther hills, jist goin' out o' a canyon, thet a band o' Injuns was comin' straight fer us, we jist let into 'em with yell an' revolver, an' our horses pounced out on a charge.

"Col'nell, I were pretty full o' biz myself, but I seen ther cap'n doin' charmin' work, an' I see Dry Jim an' Lightnin' Joe go down, an' then I see ther cap'n's horse fall, an' I got through, though you see I were somewhat scratched."

"I should think so, my brave Mike," said the colonel, glancing at the half-dozen wounds the man had received.

"But poor Langdon was killed? I feared this daily," he continued.

"I won't say he were kilt, col'nell, fer he

were alive an' kickin' when I last seen him; but his horse were kilt, an' I know Jim an' Joe were, an' I didn't see Bony Bob when I looked back; but I were in a hurry myself, fer I hed a hundred red-skins arter me."

"You were lucky to escape, Mike."

"I were fer a pious fact; but ole Whale-bone carried me out o' sight o' the Injun ponies, tho' he were badly wounded, and it jist kilt him, too, an' I rid my own hoofs back to ther fort, an' here I is, pretty much o' a pepper-box myself; but I'll soon git mended, an' then, col'nell, I intends ter take some Comanche ha'r jist on account o' ther cap'n, who I loves as a son."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE GIRL TRAILER.

HAVING ascertained fully from Moccasin Mike the locality of the Indians' rendezvous, Colonel Willoughby gave orders for a battalion of troopers to be ready to start by midnight, determined to make an attack on the red skins in force.

While talking with his wife preparatory to starting, an orderly announced a visitor to see the colonel.

"Who can it be at this time of night?" queried the colonel.

"It is a woman, sir," said the orderly.

"A woman! some one from the fort?"

"No, sir, she came on horseback to the gate, and the sergeant of the guards admitted her."

"Show her in then."

The orderly disappeared and soon returned and ushered in a person who was at once an object of surprise and admiration to both Colonel Willoughby and his wife.

It was a young girl, scarcely over sixteen, and dressed in crimson hood, cloth bodice and skirt, the former close-fitting to her exquisite form, and the latter reaching below her knees, where it was met by red leggings.

Small moccasins covered her feet, gauntlet gloves incased her tiny hands, and a black sombrero with a crimson plume sheltered her head.

Her face was bronzed by exposure to the elements, yet perfect in feature and very beautiful, and her hair was a rich golden, and hung in massive braids below her waist.

Her eyes were black and full of expression, and unflinchingly she turned them upon the colonel and his wife.

At her back hung a small repeating-rifle, and in her belt were a knife and a pair of pearl-handled revolvers, showing that she was not to be trifled with.

"Crimson Katel" broke involuntarily from the lips of Lilian at sight of her, and hearing it, the young girl flushed and asked quickly:

"Yes, lady, my name is Kate; but may I ask how I am known to you?"

Her voice was low and musical, and Mrs. Willoughby replied:

"You told a scout of the fort, several nights ago, that your name was Kate, and upon account of your costume we prefixed Crimson."

The girl smiled, and said:

"Did any of the party escape?"

"Yes, the very scout whom you warned."

"I hoped they all would, for, knowing that the Indians were in the mountains, I sought to warn them."

"And do you dwell so far from the aid of the forts, may I ask?" said Colonel Willoughby, who had not before spoken to her.

"I do, sir."

"And you have friends there whom the Indians do not molest?"

"I have friends there, sir; but I came not to speak of myself, but of a young officer who is a prisoner in the hands of the Comanches."

"Hail you refer to the captain?"

"I do, sir; he was wounded, and his horse falling with him was captured."

"Thank Heaven he lives!"

"If he is not rescued, sir, it would be better that he had died, for the Comanches only await the coming of the Apache band to put him to death by torture."

"This is fearful, and I will do all in my power to save poor Lester."

"I have come to show you how it can be done, sir."

"You?"

"Yes, sir; the camp of the Indians I know well, and will take your command by a secret pass directly to it."

"You, a girl?"

"Yes, for I know the country well."

"And how is it that I find you friendly to the Indians?"

"I said not, sir, that I was friendly to them; my coming here would prove friendship for my own people rather, and deep sympathy for your officer."

"Ah! you know him then?"

"I have seen him," was the evasive reply.

"You offer to lead my command against the Indians?"

"I do, sir."

"When?"

"To-night, for the Apaches are daily expected to join the Comanches, and then the officer dies by torture."

"Oh, Rollo, something must be done to save poor Lester," cried Mrs. Willoughby.

"True, madam, and the sooner the command moves the better."

"How far is their camp from here?"

"If we leave within an hour we can get there before dawn by good riding."

"What force have they?"

"Fully five hundred warriors, sir."

"Under what chief?"

"Coyote, the Red Comanche."

"Ah! under that devil, are they? Then we will have to fight; but, my girl, you will pardon me if I am a little suspicious of you, and fear you might be leading us into an ambush."

The dark face flushed, the eyes flashed, and the bosom heaved with momentary anger; but checking her passion, she seemed at once hurt by the doubt, and said reproachfully:

"Oh, sir, would I betray my own people?"

"No, no, I will trust you, Crimson Kate, and I will leave you with my wife, who will give you some refreshments, while I go and order more men into the saddle than I originally intended taking."

"The more the safer, sir, for the Apaches may unite at any time with the Comanches."

"That is wisdom, Crimson Kate," and the colonel left the room, and going out found the maiden's horse, a wiry, long-bodied, slender-limbed animal, patiently awaiting at the door.

"Orderly, take that horse and have him thoroughly rubbed down and fed," he said, as he passed on to the quarters of the officers.

Just an hour after, and a short while before midnight, the cavalry regiment rode out of the fort, and at its head, by the side of the colonel, was Crimson Kate, the Girl Trailer, mounted upon her splendid horse, that seemed not to feel his long gallop of an hour before.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TRAILED TO DOOM.

At a swift gallop, as soon as the horses got a little warmed up, the Girl Trailer set off without for an instant consulting the colonel, and the troopers followed wondering at the strange circumstance of a regiment following a girl to battle.

At length, after a rapid ride of five hours, in which thirty-five miles had been put behind them, they reached the foothills of the mountains, and without hesitation the Girl Trailer rode straight toward what appeared to be a precipice.

But as they drew near all saw how close had been her calculation to strike the point she had aimed for, as a narrow opening was in the cliff, through which the men could only pass two by two.

Here the girl rode ahead of the colonel, and though the darkness was intense, never wavered from the path she knew would lead

her right, although right and left other canyons were frequently seen.

After a ride of fifteen minutes the path began to ascend, and it was hard work climbing for the horses; but all pressed on without hesitation, and at last came out upon a plateau.

Here the girl called a halt, and told the colonel to order his men to look to their saddle-girths and arms, but to make no noise, as an unusual sound would destroy all.

"Where is the camp?" asked Colonel Willoughby, after having passed the order down the line in a whisper.

"Come."

Silently he followed her for a few paces, and found where a path led down the mountain-side.

"It is not steep, and at its foot is a torrent that will drown all sound, and the Indians keep no guards here, as they believe no one knows the pass. Once across the stream and the camp is not fifty yards distant, and in the largest *tepee*, the medicine tent, is the prisoner. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

The girl, declining the aid of the colonel, leaped lightly into her saddle, and once more led the column.

Down the path they went in single file, and reaching the lowland at the bottom saw the foaming cataract, and beyond the faintly glimmering lights of the dying camp-fires.

Across the stream they went, and getting an idea of the formation of the village in the indistinct light, for it was not yet daylight, Colonel Willoughby formed his order of attack, and turned to speak to the girl.

But she had mysteriously disappeared.

"She rode behind that large boulder," said a sergeant.

But upon looking behind it she was not there, and if she had gone by that way, she had had to plunge her horse boldly into the stream.

"Forward!" cried the colonel, and into the torrent they went, and plunged through to the other shore.

"Remember, Haddock, you and your company strike for yonder medicine *tepee*, for it is the largest, and rescue Langdon."

"Charge!"

A wild cheer answered the ringing command of Rollo Willoughby, and down upon the Indian camp they rushed.

There were wild screams of frightened women and children, shouts of defiance from brave warriors, war-whoops, stern orders in English and Comanche tongues, the thundering of iron hoofs, rattling of sabers and spurs, shots, clashing of steel, and flashes of firearms to light up the scene, and make it one wild inferno upon earth.

For half an hour the fierce combat lasted, and then the troopers rallied together, for those of the Indians who could escape, had fled to the nearest hills, leaving their village in flames and all in the hands of the pale-faces.

But the greatest victory to Rollo Willoughby was the rescue of his favorite, Lester Langdon, whom Lieutenant Haddock had found bound hand and foot in the medicine-lodge.

But, upon the ride back to the fort, when told to whom he owed his rescue, he seemed surprised, and said he had never heard of the existence of Crimson Kate, until told by Moccasin Mike of her warning to him a few nights before.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BITTER END.

As Lester Langdon was wounded, he was compelled to keep his quarters for two weeks, at the expiration of which he was again able to be in the saddle.

One night, soon after, as he was about to make a reconnoissance with his company of scouts, into the plaza of the fort rode Crimson Kate, the Girl Trapper, as all the soldiers now called her.

She made no reference to her former service, or her mysterious disappearance the night of the attack of the Indian village, nor would she speak of her elf, and said she only came to state that a Government train was coming on the upper trail, and that the Indians were making arrangements to attack it at a certain point.

She also stated that the train numbered some fifty fighting men, and that the Indians would attack with five times that force, and she could lead a hundred troopers upon them when they rode down upon the camp.

Colonel Willoughby at once ordered Captain Langdon to take his company of seventy-five scouts and follow the girl, telling her that that number of bordermen were worth treble as many soldiers, and they would render a good account of themselves.

Away started the scouts, the Girl Trapper and the young captain riding side by side, and as she had promised she led them to where they struck a large and fresh Indian trail; following it they moved quickly on and soon heard shots in advance.

A few moments after they came in sight of a train of wagons, hastily corraled for action, and large numbers of Indians charging down upon it.

Instantly, with their wild yells the scouts charged the red-skins, who, wholly surprised, and caught between two fires, broke in wild confusion and fled.

It had been the intention of Lester Langdon not to lose sight of Crimson Kate; but she had, as before, most mysteriously disappeared, and no one could tell whither she had gone.

Having saved the train, the young captain acted as an escort for it on to the line of posts, and at last returned to Fort Advance to find Colonel Willoughby preparing for a forced march.

"Come, Lester, you're back just in time, if you are not too tired, for I have heard of your gallant charge, and how you saved the train, and you may be broken down," said the colonel.

"Not a bit of it, sir; but may I ask how you heard of it?"

"Through Crimson Kate."

"The Girl Trapper?"

"None other; she is with Lilian now, and has come to lead me to the camp of Coyote the Comanche, who is plotting a grand raid upon the settlements, and is assembling all his warriors."

"Get your men mounted on fresh horses, and come, for I intend to take every man not necessary to the defense of the fort, and end this Indian raiding."

Lester Langdon was only too anxious to obey, and getting a fresh mount he joined the colonel and Crimson Kate as they were leaving the fort.

As before, the Girl Trapper led the command unerringly, though the trail was a long one, and went into the very fastnesses of the mountains.

Just at dawn she showed the village to the colonel, and down upon the unsuspecting red-skins the troopers charged.

And at once the fight became fierce and deadly, for the warriors fought with desperation, headed by their great chief, Coyote the Comanche.

But at last the red-skins broke in wild flight, fled to the canyons for safety, and the victory was won, and Colonel Willoughby held the village, and taking possession of the chief's tepee, gave orders to look after the wounded, and that the command would camp there for several days.

"I has got him, col'nell, and the sojer pards is fetchin' him," cried Moccasin Mike, rushing up.

"Got who, Mike?"

"The Coyote."

"What! the Comanche chief?"

"Yas, col'nell, an' he are Comanche only in name, fer he hev a white skin."

"Ha! a renegade?"

"True as preachin', col'nell; and ther gal is comin' too."

"What girl?"

"The Crimson gal, ther Trapper, sir; she

saw him fall when I raised my shooter, an' she jist come a-humpin' it, an' I'm thinkin'— But heur they is."

Just then four soldiers came up, bearing on poles a prostrate form, and by their side walked Crimson Kate, the Girl Trailer, her face pale and sad.

"Lay him there, men; well, sir, you have been wounded I see?" and the colonel addressed the chief, who was in full war-paint and Indian costume, but whose neck and hands were white.

"Yes, I've got my death wound, and reached the end of my rope at last, Colonel Willoughby," was the answer.

"Who are you?"

"Ask that girl!"

"My father," was the low response of Crimson Kate, as the eyes of all sought her face.

"Your father?" cried Lester Langdon.

"Yes."

"Your name, sir?" said the colonel.

"Coyote the Comanche it has been the past six years that I have been making it hot for your troopers, Colonel Willoughby; but in the olden time it was Loyd Langdon."

"Good God!"

The cry came from the lips of both the colonel and Lester Langdon, and the latter said:

"You then are Loyd Langdon? I thought you were dead, as I never heard of you after your escape."

"Yes, I am your cousin, and I am not dead, but soon will be. When I could not live among pale-faces, I sought a home with red-skins, and became their chief. Knowing that you sought my daughter, to carry out your pledge to her mother, made as Old Hickory, I went after her, and I brought her here, and had it not been for this attack, she would soon have become the wife of Red Tiger, the young Apache chief."

"Ah, man! man! of what are you made?" groaned Lester Langdon, while Crimson Kate had buried her face in her hands.

Unheeding his remark, the renegade chief continued:

"With death so near I am not as bitter now, and would not care to see her dragged down to become a red-skin's wife, though she has never loved me, so you can keep your pledge, if so you are inclined."

"She shall be as a sister to me; yes, Kate, you are my cousin, and I pledged my word to your dying mother to care for and protect you," and the young officer drew the maiden toward him.

But her face still remained buried in her hands, and she uttered no word, and again the renegade spoke:

"Forgive me, Kate, if you can."

"Dying, I forgive you; if you lived I never would do so," was the firm response.

"Dying, I am forgiven then; so be it; I ask no more.

"May you be happy, and I know that you will.

"Farewell."

He closed his eyes, as if to shut out the view around him, clasped his hands upon his breast, and thus remained until he died, refusing to utter another word, and giving no groan, although he suffered untold agonies.

CONCLUSION.

In the mountains where he fell the Renegade Chief, Coyote, the Comanche, but known to the reader in the past as Loyd Langdon, was quietly buried.

And then loaded down with their wounded, and the spoils of the Indian village, the troopers took up their march back to the fort.

It was a glad surprise to Lilian Willoughby to see Kate Langdon, and warmly into her heart and home she welcomed her.

For a short while the young girl seemed impressed with all she had gone through, but at last the remembrance of her cruel father wore away, and she consented at the earnest solicitation of Lester Langdon, to go to his home and engage a governess under whom to prosecute her studies for a couple of years.

Mrs. Willoughby volunteered to accompany her, and a month after their departure, the colonel and Lester received letters telling them of their settling down in Langdon Hall, and of Kate's having begun work under her governess, who was a most estimable and accomplished lady.

For a short vacation in the winter, as Mrs. Willoughby was coming back to join her husband, Kate and the governess accompanied her, and it was in riding over the prairies one day together that Lester Langdon told his love to the lovely maiden, and heard in return that she had loved him from their first meeting.

Kate and the governess did not return as soon as they had expected, and when they did the maiden went back as Mrs. Lester Langdon, having been married to her cousin by the fort chaplain.

And resigning his commission, as the affairs of his estate needed his care, Lester Langdon settled down at Langdon Hall, and to this day has never had regret that he was at one time a Texas Cowboy, for by it he gained his beautiful wife, Crimson Kate, the Girl Trailer.

THE END.

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